BRITISH 1/- EDITION

EXCITING WESTERN

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

DECEMBER

FEATURING TWO NOVELS

VIGILANTE VALLEY

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

TO HELL WITH COW POOLS

By TOM ROAN

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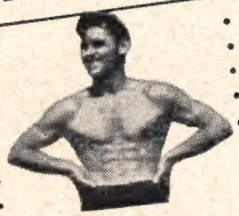

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H. M. Holland.

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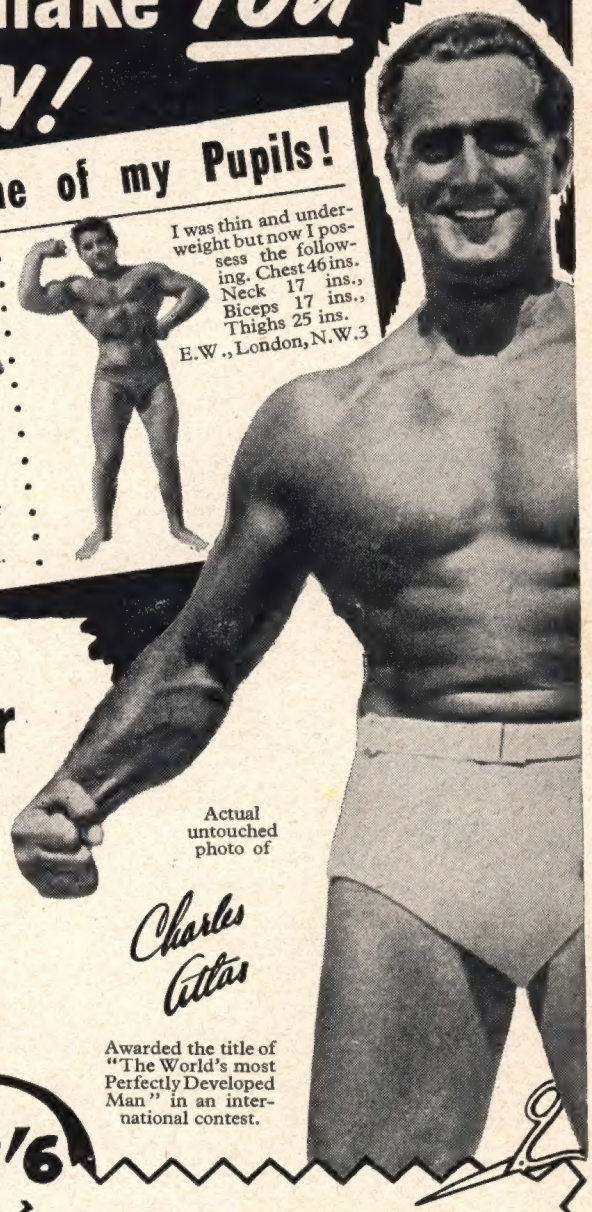

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EXCITING WESTERN

Vol. II, No. 2. (British Edition) December 1952

Contents

TO HELL WITH COW POOLS . . . . . **Tom Roan** 2
It was a town of hot dames and cold-eyed killers and Lance had never seen its like—even in Texas

VIGILANTE VALLEY . . . . . **Wayne D. Overholser** 33
Young Dave Mathers was riding back home—to gut-shoot the men who had strung his dad from a tree

A MAN CAN BE WRONG . . . . **De Witt Newbury** 51
There are times it takes a snake—to beat a snake

WHITE QUEEN CALLING . . . . . **Adam Rebel** 58
When the mare gave birth, the wolf pack moved in

HORSESHOES AREN'T ALWAYS LUCKY . **Sam Brant** 62
Four grim bandits try a bold robbery in Wagonville!

YOUR NEXT ISSUE WILL BE ON SALE
~~~ TUESDAY, JAN. 20th ~~~

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Like a crazy man, he was shooting with both hands

TO HELL

Lance came from Texas—but big Texas would have to go damn far to outsin that hell-ridden, vice-plagued hole Wyoming called a town!

CHAPTER I.

In Flames.

IT was a ride of the mad that night in Wyoming in the 70's, a crazed plunge over the rim and down the western slopes of the great ridge.

There were eleven riders, long-haired and buck-skinned Texas fighting men howling like raging maniacs. A pale moon reflected on the silvered ornaments on their big saddles and bridles, making flashing targets for the rustler crew waiting below, but the Texans didn't give a damn. Saner men would have seen this only as a suicidal plunge straight into the certain jaws of death, but the cry for blood was on every tongue, and no man had hesitated—not since herd-grabbers had raided them on the trail, killed some of the drivers and got clean away.

It had taken the Texans three weeks to run the cattle thieves down, but they had them now! The rustlers would pay to a man!

Three Texas horses bawled, lost their uncertain footing, and fell before the flashing gunfire that suddenly opened up below. As if by a miracle their riders managed to fling clear of their saddles.

Still howling like maniacs, the unhorsed three came up snarling and cursing, opening fire with a six-shooter in each hand and racing on afoot. Madmen were on those windy slopes tonight, each going to do his part or die trying!

Only a few men in all the wide near-lawless frontier country would have dared such a desperate ride. Only a few men would ever have thought of following Lance Wilde, young foreman of the Cross Bar and trail boss of their disrupted drive, into the desperate charge he now led.

Pearley Gray, old-timer with the Cross Bar outfit, rode beside Lance, his thinly bearded face a tomahawk in the wind. Big, red-bearded Blue-nose Dexter was at Lance's left, his voice a roaring bull-gorilla's.

The other vengeance-seeking riders were just as wild and daring. Throughout the Southwest their names were known as those of dangerous men, reck-

with COW POOLS

A Novel by TOM ROAN

less men who had made their share of bloody history, expert equally with guns or with dripping blades.

Ahead, more guns flashed orange and red. Bullets were raking the slopes, fired by men terrorized by the fury sweeping down on them. Beyond those rustlers a herd of longhorn steers had lunged to its feet. Every wild-eyed head was up, tails beginning to switch, a suddenly alarmed herd getting ready to stampede.

That was exactly the way Lance Wilde and his trail drivers wanted it. South of the herd a pale eye of campfire still burned between four huge covered wagons. Suddenly appearing and dropping to their knees beside one of the wagons, two half-dressed men opened fire with heavy rifles.

One of those men, the attackers knew, would be the bull-necked and bull-voiced Axel MacGovern, an all-round Texas two-gun fighting badman, who undoubtedly claimed ownership of the herd and wagons. Both men drew gunfire toward them at the same time, then one of them jerked to his feet and went bucking backward among the wagons.

When he reappeared, he paused long enough to snatch something that looked like a pair of heavy saddlebags from one of the forward wagons. Then he flung himself into the saddle of a snorting horse and was gone.

At that moment the other man dropped his rifle and turned to flee. All the fight was gone out of him as he piled into the saddle of his horse.

Because Lance Wilde had been hoping for a glimpse of Axel MacGovern, who he was certain was the leader of the rustlers, he saw it all. The first man to flee was MacGovern! Wilde, standing in his stirrups, fired four shots at the pair, cursed his luck, and rode on into the blazing hell of bullets. His own men were shooting and howling behind him, every long-hair of them a cold-blooded killer tonight.

The break was already coming, startingly sudden. Down below, men began falling back. The cattle, too, were suddenly moving, stringing out in a rush.

With the cattle stampeding, Axel MacGovern's rustler crew were no longer willing to fight. Six had already died, the unerring gunfire on the slopes reeling four out of five of them from the saddles of frantically rearing horses. Others who had not dropped from their saddles to fight were wheeling their horses and spurring away.

It was an abrupt and shameless rout. Every man seemed only for himself, yet all were apparently heading for the same break in the tall ridge on the western side of the valley. Some would not ride far before their wounds would pull them down.

"Bait for the buzzards!' bawled old Pearley Gray, standing in his stirrups. "Hell, I said they wouldn't stand and face the music once we started pouring it to 'em! Them that tried to show fight was so damn scared they couldn't hit a cow under the tail with a bull-fiddle from three feet away!"

Wilde and his fighting crew had come through without the loss of a man. But three of their horses had died, two shot from under their riders, the third breaking his neck in a tumbling fall. Some of the men had bullet-holes through their hats and clothing. One man's saddle-horn had been shot off. A couple of other horses had been bullet-burned, and that was all. The luck of the devils had been with them.

Sparing only a few moments to take stock of themselves and their horses, six of Wilde's men already had gone tearing on behind the herd, knowing what to do from orders given long before the fight, and bent on keeping the cattle running straight up the valley.

The men who had lost their horses quickly found other saddled mounts left standing with reins dragging where their dying riders had parted company with them.

"Waiting to start running when we hit 'em!" Hat in hand now, old Pearley Gray shook his head, making his long gray hair fly. "Lots and lots of difference what happened here than when they shot us all to hell with that big gang of damn Indians and squawmen to help 'em! I told you, Lance, that only a yaller-bellied gopher would ride for Axel MacGovern, and this proves it!"

What he said was true. It had not been like this at all that dark, rain-whipped night weeks ago and far to southward. Having been on the trail for days without spotting trouble, Lance Wilde had had twenty-two trail drovers, three big wagons,

and twenty-nine hundred head of longhorns bedded down in a narrow valley between two giant mountain walls.

Axel MacGovern's coming that night had been no sudden, all-out charge like this. MacGovern, suspected throughout the Southwest for his vicious attacks on trail herds, never gave a man a chance to defend himself if he could possibly avoid it. There had been no hint of warning. Backed that night by more than forty renegade Cheyennes and Utes, and a dozen wolfish whites who lived with the Indians, the first intimation of an attack had been the firing on the sleeping camp from the darkness.

Four of Wildes' trail drivers who had been changing guard in night-hawk duty, and had been standing beside the campfire drinking hot coffee, had been dropped with the first shots. They had died without even realizing what was happening to them. Without a chance to make it a fight, seven more of Wilde's men had died before the howling, screaming fury of reds and whites whose whistling lead had stampeded the herd.

Indians and whites had followed the running cattle, leaving death behind them, and three wagons becoming charred wreckage as they went up in clouds of smoke and flame. The climax of the night's dirty work.

The tragedy had been no new thing. Sudden raids and out-and-out herd-grabbings were happening only too often these days on the long and lonely trails from Texas to Wyoming. Bargains could be struck between crooked white men and the many renegade Indian bands roving the far and scantily settled sections of the great frontier.

Law in these wild and lonely regions was in the hands of the man with the fastest gun or knife. Powder, bullets, and the makings for barrels of Indian rum could be carried on a couple of light wagons. Off the beaten trails a man with guns and rum with which to bargain could reach an understanding with dangerous characters who would do his bidding without asking questions.

Lance Wilde had not plunged after the herd. Too well he knew that white and red raiders alike would be waiting in ambush to kill his pursuing crew. Instead, after burying the dead, he had turned back southward with what was left of his fighting men.

At his orders, they showed all the signs of being whipped dogs with their tails between their legs, on their way back to Texas to bemoan their loss as others had done. Scouts had followed them, and they had known it. They had made their swing-back only when certain that the scouts had quit spying.

And yet, of all men, Axel MacGovern who knew Lance Wilde so well, might have known that the Cross Bar foreman and his fighting Texans would follow him to hell and back to recover the herd.

Tonight MacGovern could have made a better fight. His Indian and white renegades had gone after the herd. But the eighteen men of his regular bunch had been enough to put up one hell of a fight if they'd had the stomach for fighting. They had turned yellow after seeing those desperate riders on the slopes, and after seeing six of their own number fall dead.

So, seeing his men deserting him, MacGovern had had little choice except to flee. But Lance Wilde had an idea the raider had not gone far. Likely he was up there right now on the slopes, watching, and his evil brain would be scheming how to get the herd back.

The four wagons were puzzling. Bender and Clark, two of Wilde's drivers, had seen only two wagons with the herd when spying on the outfit four evenings ago. The herd also seemed to have grown in size all at once.

Now wide-open country and rolling prairies were ahead. Not many renegade Indians and their white cronies would dare get any closer to the cliff-rimmed railroad town of Music Bluffs, only a long two-day drive, where big herds were sold and shipped.

"Looks like we've lost the horse and mule herd." It took only a few minutes for old Pearley Gray to see that. "They was below the wagons. Being smart, Axel had a couple of wranglers holding 'em. Looks now like we ain't going to have nothing to pull them damn wagons, Lance."

"Maybe we won't have any wagons to pull!" Wilde had looked back at them, eyes beginning to widen. One wagon seemed to be glowing brighter and brighter inside, its long canvas top turning red. "Look! Damn it, Pearley, that wagon's afire!"

"Why—why, hell, yes!" gasped Gray, staring. "And maybe not just one afire at that!"

CHAPTER II.

"FIGHTING IS OUR BUSINESS."

THE first fire noticed was in the wagon where Wilde had seen the big man grab something that had looked like saddle-bags. Now they saw a red glow in a second wagon, then a third. All at once a noise of something bursting came from the first wagon. The canvas roof split as if a great licking red and yellow blade had cut through it from the inside. In a moment the wagon was a licking cloud of flames, black smoke boiling as if oil and tar burned in the fire.

"Damn!" snarled old Pearley, his pale eyes big and round under the wide brim of a battered once-white hat. "That buzzard and the wolf with him had everything ready and set to fire 'em before they lit a shuck, Lance! Why'n hell did they?"

"To keep us from getting the wagons!" Lance Wilde was backing his horse away. "Watch yourself! There may be kegs of powder in them he hasn't yet had a chance to swap to Indians!"

An explosion came the next instant, a thundering roar that turned the burning wagon into a spouting volcano of fire, hurling burning wreckage in all directions. The sides of the wagon bulged, planks splintering. Out tumbled burning kegs, bales, bundles and boxes. One box went high in the air. It landed on a rock and burst to bits. Out bounced heavily greased carbines, fire already beginning to devour their wooden stocks.

"Damn him!" cried old Gray. "He was carrying guns and ammunition to trade to reds, and didn't want anybody finding the evidence to hang him!"

With flames mounting so rapidly they must have been fed with oil, exploding cartridges were sounding like maddened trap-drums, and the last wagon was going. Fire had licked along the canvas top as burning wreckage fell on it. Flames were dancing, widening yellow and red ribbons.

"Look, Lance!" Gray had swung out his hand and caught Wilde's arm. "Hell alive, do you see what I see! Damned if it ain't Paul of the Bible in the fiery furnace! Only—only it's a *woman*!"

Garbed in elaborately fringed and beaded yellow buckskins, and a small white hat, a tall, pale-haired beauty had jumped from the rear of the last burning wagon. With flames spreading around her, she was pulling at two large green carpet-bags. Dragging them out of the wagon, she had whirled to flee into the darkness when Lance Wilde lunged his horse forward and dropped out of saddle in front of her. Dropping the bags, a cry of alarm broke from her lips.

"Oh, no! Oh,—*no*!"

From her horrified expression, Lance, bearded, with the dust of the long trail on him, buckskins torn and singed from raking brush and campfires, might have been a specter suddenly dropping in front of her in the crackling flames lighting the night. He reached for his sadly rumpled gray hat.

But as quickly Lance Wilde changed his mind. He let his hand drop. His lean face had become as hard as a pine-knot. The corners of a thin-lipped mouth twisted. Cold blue eyes were suddenly bullets in cocked guns looking down into her startled brown eyes. He spoke, old Pearley Gray staring from the background.

"Good evening!" Wilde bit out the words. "Morning, I should say now. Going somewhere?"

"Who—are you!" she gasped. "You—you scared me!"

"Down Texas way"—he almost smiled in spite of himself—"they hire me to go around haunting houses and scaring people. Up here I run guns and ammunition to Indians. The reds help me steal cattle and kill white men—and sometimes women—on the trails."

"Long past time to get the hell out of here, Lance!" Pearley Gray called. He was leading a tall roan that had had some MacGovern's rider's blood hastily wiped from the big saddle. "This ain't a right good place to get caught in if them killers gets guts enough to turn back on us. Here's a horse for the gal. I know you're too damn soft-headed to leave her here afoot. Let's swing up them bags she seems to prize so high."

The old man was right. Already a few shots were sounding from the ridge where two or three MacGovern men were trying to show a little more fight from a safe distance. But they were so far away it would have been only an accident if a bullet had scored a hit.

"Just like whipped dogs baying back from a hillside." Gray grinned as he ad-

justed the stirrups on the roan. "Damn 'em!"

Close to the girl now, Wilde saw that she was no more than twenty. He caught up her heavy bags, and Pearley tied them behind the cantle of the roan's saddle. Lance Wilde suddenly swooped the girl up in his arms, swung her into the saddle.

"If there's talk to make," he told her, "it can be made on the way to Music Bluffs. If you haven't got friends there it won't be hard for your kind to find them."

"It sure won't!" agreed Gray. "Whole town's full of honkytonks, and, sister"—he suddenly grinned—"you've got plenty for one! No apology. Only a honkytonk woman would be found on a trail with Axel MacGovern and his outfit!"

"I was not with Mr. MacGovern until three evenings ago!" she cried. As they turned away, the heat made the horses rear and plunge. "Events I could not control forced me to accept his protection to the railroad at Music Bluffs!"

"Fine feller you picked for protection!" Old Gray grinned from the side of his mouth. "Like asking the devil to steer your little tootsie-wootsies clear of hell and him caught with a sinner shortage on his hands!"

More shots were sounding high on the ridge. Near-spent bullets slapped around them until they were away from the light of the burning wagons, more cartridges and kegs of powder exploding behind them, gushes of fire flying in all directions.

Once away from the wagons and in the deeper shadows there were no more shots from the ridge. They rounded a bend, and a gentle rise ahead marked the north end of the narrow little valley. Beyond the rise it would be open fighting ground for all hands, and MacGovern men would not like that.

Music Bluffs was straight ahead now. The herd, Wilde saw as they neared his men who were urging the cattle on with waving hats and popping quirts, was in excellent condition. Plenty of grass and water was between here and town. But the game would have to be played out in town, and Axel MacGovern would be known in Music Bluffs. And men of his caliber would be sure to have pull with politicians, lawyers and maybe with the marshals in such far-flung frontier places.

When dawn came Wilde and Gray still held a glum silence toward the girl. She had asked few questions, and they had volunteered no information. For the most part it was as though she did not exist, and there was only an empty saddle on the horse between them.

When they had reached the cattle the riders had slowed them to a great, tired mass in a mile-wide draw against the foot of a tall mesa. Gentle handling had started the herd stringing on. In the dawn-light now the last longhorn was far up on the mesa and the herd moving as quietly as old wagon horses going home after a long day in harness.

Surprised as they had been by the size of the herd back there in the darkness of the valley, Wilde and Gray now were amazed by its size. Up here on the high, level mesa where they could really look at it, they were convinced that there were about six thousand head of longhorns. Wilde had been tempted to ask the girl if she knew anything about it, but changed his mind, playing the waiting game with her.

His thoughts kept going to Axel MacGovern. What had MacGovern been doing back there where he had been run to earth? He had been taken completely off his guard, surprised, and put on the run before he could get started to fight. It would take time for him to regather his remaining men. Cut to pieces and scattered as they had been, few of them would be eager to jump right back into another fight.

Setting fire to the wagons had been an old trick of rum and gun-runners in Indian country. But it could never entirely destroy the evidence. The metal parts of guns, and cartridge shells were always left after the hottest fire, but to fire the wagons seemed the only thing such men could think of when suddenly surprised and addled with thoughts of being caught with the contraband that had hanged so many runners out here on the frontier.

Wilde caught himself almost constantly watching the girl from the corners of his eyes. Philosophic resignation seemed to have settled over her. Apparently she was merely waiting, not letting herself think of anything that might be in store for her among these rough and bearded men who had struck the camp in the valley like an avalanche of screaming wild animals charging in for the death stroke on the un-

suspecting. Now they were quiet, sober as judges, and beginning to act like men. Wilde finally tried to draw her out.

"You said something about falling in with Axel MacGovern and his gang only three evenings ago." He was watching her face closely. "Why did you join up with his outfit when you were so close to Music Bluffs?"

"There was nothing else to do." A deep sigh that might have been one of relief came from her. Both hands dropped to her saddle-horn, she leaned wearily forward, looking straight ahead. "We were on a trail a dozen miles west of Mr. MacGovern's trail. I had two wagons, three men, and eighteen hundred head of cattle left. There were fourteen men, three wagons and twenty-eight hundred head of good steers when I left the Canadian River. Indians struck us four times. We lost two wagons, a thousand head of cattle, and were cut to pieces when Mr. MacGovern sent men and word for me to join him and he would see my outfit safely on through."

"Big-hearted Axel!" Old man Gray grimaced. "Just like him! Most any day he'd give yuh a button if you'd sew a couple of shirts on it for him."

"Then"—she glanced at him—"you know him?"

"No!" cut in the old man, a frown crossing his face. "Only the devil knows Axel MacGovern, and even the devil ain't a feller who'd brag about it. Go on, ma'am."

"There's little more to tell." She looked at Wilde. For a second her smile was thin and hard. "I'm Grace Reboe, the last of the Reboes who once meant something in the cattle business on the Canadian River. This spring I sold the last of the range, and slowly headed north with what cattle I had left. I'm convinced that I hired the wrong trail boss, though he was supposed to have driven many herds from Texas to Wyoming with little or no trouble. His name was Cross White. Would either of you know him?' '

"Not by that name, ma'am." Gray looked up at the ever-brightening sky with a scowl. "Big feller, was he?"

"Yes." She nodded. "About the size of Mr. MacGovern, and perhaps ten years older. He claimed to be sixty-five. They were so much alike in size and bearing they could easily pass for brothers. In spite of neither admitting it, I had a feeling they had known each other somewhere in the past—and perhaps very well!"

"And ten to one they did!" put in Lance Wilde. "Maybe two men with a perfect understanding, Miss Reboe. Axel MacGovern's like that. Your Indian trouble sounds like him. In fact, when we have a chance to check this herd we may find that the cattle you thought you'd lost are right here."

"I have some hopes of it." She looked at him again, piercingly. "And now"—she straightened in her saddle—"I would like to hear something about you. You had me frightened at first. I thought you were rustlers, herd-grabbers. I—I still haven't heard much to make me change my mind. Would you mind enlightening me just a little?"

Wilde grinned, rubbing the thick stubble of beard on his face. "Anybody who wants to listen can hear our side of it. What we did was to slap at Axel MacGovern to get back what belongs to us. In the slap-back it looks as if we might pull some of your chestnuts out of the fire at the same time, if what you've told us is true. I'm Lance Wilde, from the Cross Bar outfit on the Brazos. The long, tall, cock-eyed and strictly handsome gentleman beside you who might smell of horses from a mile away is something we call Gray, pedigree of any note rather doubtful, and—"

"Just don't pay no attention to him, ma'am!" cut in Gray, turning his ugly grin up at the sky and scratching his throat with the tip of a horny forefinger. "In anything eegitimate or uneegitimate he ain't to be trusted farther than a hungry horsefly landing square on your nose! Ain't no good going to come of anything he tells yuh."

Laughter came from Grace Reboe, tenseness falling from her lips like the sudden shedding of a cloak of gloom. Minutes later, after Wilde and Gray had told her all they could, she was still smiling, but there were big tears on her cheeks, and the misty brown eyes were staring ahead.

"I—I thank you now for coming," she stammered, her lips trembling. "You, and all your men! I'll try my best to repay you somehow. Something tells me I'm going to need you to see me through yet, in—in Music Bluffs."

"Hell, ma'am," chuckled Gray, "that'll be a pleasure! Just give us light to shoot by, and don't come at us in the dark without a mite of warning first. Fighting, you see, is our business!"

CHAPTER III.

ROPE FOR A HOLD-OUT.

AFTER making camp on the mesa, they rode on, and at four o'clock the next afternoon Music Bluffs could be seen in the distance. It was on the broad flat of a series of rimrocked benchlands, with walls of wind-eroded blue-gray cliffs behind it. A big creek, lined with cottonwoods, gushed from under a high railroad trestle at the east end. The first house clung like a dark spider up the slope above the water's edge.

Music Bluffs, rated as one of the toughest towns on the frontier, was a ragtown railhead that had been left behind when the Union Pacific had pushed its long tracks across the prairies. Stores, houses, saloons, dives and shacks were stretched along the tracks. On one side of the tracks were cattle pens, sheds, and warehouses, shacks and hovels that housed the dregs of humanity found in every frontier town.

Pearley Gray had left the mesa camp long before dawn for town, with a pocket filled with money Wilde had given him. When Wilde and the girl, a mile ahead of the herd, reached a spurlike rise on the rim they saw him riding to meet them, buckskins shaggy, hair long, face bearded and dirty.

"Yeah, I got some clothes and boots and such for us both," he announced, as he swung beside them. "Wagon load of grub, too. We'll camp with them four wagons you see on the flat just east of the trestle. The wagons belong to Boot Bullard and he's got what's left of his trail herd outfit with him. Been waiting since July for the money for his herd. One wagon's like a house on wheels. Miss Reboe can take it." He stared at the town below them. "But fact being fact, it ain't good here. Axel MacGovern's here ahead of us. Boot Bullard knows. Boot says he belongs here. And a lot of other sinful things have happened. Before you can sell a hair out of a bull's tail in that town you join a cow pool!"

"Cow pool?"

"Yep, cow pool, Lance! Calls itself the Great Western Combine. It sets the price, claims it takes only ten cents on the dollar. Ships to its own markets. Some say folks back East will eat cow-tail soup and pay a dollar a bowl for it before they're done. Owners don't do nothin'. Just hand over their herds. Great Western does the rest. They even have a gang of punchers to do the loading and dirty work. Your gang just sits back, filling the honkytonks and saloons, havin' a good time." He smiled grimly. "'Protection for the common man!' That's what it says on a big signboard across the front of a saloon where the Great Western milks the unending streams of human kindness from some kind of a cow that never goes dry. All you do as a cowman is sign your name on the dotted line. Then you wait like Boot Bullard—and hope for your money."

"Look, now!" Wilde was staring. "Are you drunk?"

"Wish I was!" Gray grinned. "Hell, I'd feel better. Even if it's you that's the long-eared braying jackass who's going to have to pay all my bills! Marshal Tim Pool says trail herd cowboys are entitled to rest after a long drive and let others here in town have the jobs."

Wilde was mad enough to fight his own shadow as they rode on, with the cattle plodding closer to the rim behind them. Amazed, Grace Reboe could only stare, unable to believe it.

"And that," Gray finally ended, "is how big herds can be grabbed by rustlers and killers on the trails. Questions ain't asked by the pool. It wants cows. Once its hands are on a herd they stay. If a cowman gets too impatient he can go to court and sue, like they've told Bullard he could. Five years from now it might come to trial, and if he gets a judgment agin the pool, it wouldn't be worth fifteen cents. We just didn't hear about this down on the Brazos.

"Boot says we can't beat it, Lance. Cowmen have tried it. There's a two story jailhouse behind the Missouri Queen, biggest hotel in town. Jail's filled with hombres like us, and some's been there since spring."

"But—but," exclaimed Grace, "Wyoming must have law!"

The old man snorted. "And that's the hell of it! Until four years ago, vigilantes took care of the lawing. If these crooks from back East tried to swing this deal then they'd of been hung. Then law moved in, courthouses and such. In three months its kicking people off what they'd thought was railroad and Government property. Now the law's solid behind the Great Western Combine. Damn it, Wyoming's got law!

"Axel MacGovern belongs here!" He

scowled. "Ain't done nothing wrong in Music Bluffs. Town laws run only to town limits. After that it's Federal law. If you don't do something agin Federal government, then you ain't done nothin'. That goes for killing and cow-grabbing. This side of the crick you see there ain't no law but Federal, and—"

He was cut short by howling and yelling from the distance. Between thirty and forty riders were racing along the wide and dusty roadway that was called the main street. Shots split the air, a great boiling cloud of dust rising from the pounding hoofs of the horses. Behind them a dragged figure bounced on the ends of long ropes, pitched high in the air, slapped back in the foot-thick dust.

Cheers lifted from rowdies on the board sidewalk in front of a saloon. Six-shooters were wheeled upward, more gunfire joined in.

"It—it's a dummy they're dragging!" cried Grace. "And they're all drunk!"

"Drunk, yeah," Gray nodded. "As crazy, hell-howling and blind drunk as free rot-gun can make 'em! But it ain't a dummy they're dragging, Miss Reboe. It's a man being dragged to bloody rags and raw bones. A little cowman from down in the New Mexico country. Boot Bullard said he was going to get it. He's refused four times to join the Great Western Combine, and they claim he's been making trouble. Now they're giving him the rope cure for a hold-out."

"Look!" Grace lifted her hand to point. "Leaning out to watch from that window above the sidewalk in the big building!"

"The Missouri Queen, yeah." Again Gray nodded. "Would the feller with him be your Mr. Cross White?"

The swirling dust made the two men in the window jerk back inside and slam down the sash.

"Cross White with MacGovern!" Grace's voice jerked. "Those killers cheered them as they raced by!"

"And that tells us things," Wilde put in. "Axel MacGovern stands well in the cow pool combine here in Music Bluffs. . . ."

Boot Bullard was a dried-up Texan from the Panhandle and not much larger than a long-legged boot. He stood leaning against the rear of a big covered wagon. Under a huge black hat that might have belonged to a Pilgrim father, Bullard's hair was a shaggy mop, and a reddish beard hung to a couple of inches above the tarnished buckles of a pair of sagging old gun-belts.

He nodded and grinned as Wilde, Grace Reboe and Gray came up. Behind them the cattle were spreading out along a smaller stream that wound its uncertain way through a big flat south and east of the wagons.

"I'm still in the running, I reckon." Bullard tried to laugh as he answered Wilde's first question. "I've got six good punchers sticking to me. A fair cook and myself. What help we can give you, we'll give."

"Then"—Wilde scowled, watching the cattle—"you've lost all hope of getting your money or anything else out of the great cow pool?"

Bullard smiled grimly. "Hell, I no longer expect anything. I'm just sticking around to see some outfit come drifting in an' blow up hard enough to bust that damn gang. . . . Here they come now to twist your tail and see how hard you're going to be to bully."

Four riders were galloping toward them from the direction of town, the one slightly in the lead smoking a big cigar. All were big, bull-chested, bull-necked men. One was a red-faced, red-lipped man in gray, with a tall brown beaver perched on his curly head. The others were typical gunmen. None too tall, none too short. They were strong, thick-set men, all with sagging cartridge belts and six-shooters at their hips. All of them stopped at once. The red-faced man spoke.

"Bullard's been talking, I see!" His tone was curt. "I'm Dash Hanlon, and I've tried to warn him. The crowd's liable to get hold of him some day like they grabbed Sam Miller, that New Mexico smart-Alec, a little while ago. This town's organized tight. Iron-fisted and iron-heeled if you want to put it like that. Law here isn't big enough when the whole crowd suddenly rises and takes things in its own hands to right just and honest matters."

"Take yourself easier, mister!" Pearley Gray was suddenly seeing red. "If you're talking to get us in your cow pool, you're only wasting some of that red lip you've got! You don't poke that 'just and honest' stuff down our necks and make us swallow it. The minute I see one of your breed I want to hear lead start sucking through your guts!"

"Hold it, Pearley!" Wilde threw out his hand and caught his arm. "Let him sing his song—and remember there's a lady present!"

CHAPTER IV.

Direct Persuasion.

Madder than a hornet, old man Pearley Gray jerked away, the devil himself hungry for a kill. "I know a bully when I look one in the eye!" he yelped. "We saw what the devils done to the New Mexico feller! If those coyotes will step down from their horses and fill their hands we'll shoot it out now! Just me and them! I've always took my hat off when I saw a rattlesnake!"

"Wait, please, Mr. Gray!" Grace Reboe caught his arm. "Let them go!"

Hanlon lifted his hat, something like a smile curling his lip. "If it was my good fortune to always meet beautiful and sensible people like you, lady, I'm sure my honest endeavor to better my fellow men would—"

"Get going, Hanlon." Wilde was moving forward, eyes mere slits, on the verge of losing grip on himself. "Axel MacGovern could have told you how it would be before you came here. He's the man I'd like to see."

"Come to our office when you're ready, Miss Reboe!" Ignoring Wilde, Hanlon turned his horse, his hat lifted. "Our combine can bring you bountiful blessings, but—" he cut his eyes to Wilde and Pearley Gray—"only six feet of earth for hotheaded fools who refuse to listen to reason! No man dares lightning to strike him."

He was gone with that, laughter breaking from the three men behind him as they spurred into a gallop.

"They're tough, Wilde." Boot Bullard had not moved from the end of the wagon. "That Hanlon has brought all this trouble that has hit Music Bluffs. He come here with only them three toughs. They picked a few bullies and right soon had a mob. Ain't a business man here who ain't scared of 'em, and that goes for the railroad folks, too."

"And you, Boot,"—Gray wheeled on him—"take it like a scared damn rabbit!"

"Six of my men was killed," Bullard said, "thinking the way you're thinkin', maybe. Six got put in jail, even the dirty law being agin 'em. I had three thousand head of steers. I could of swung east for Long Rifle, eighty miles and plenty of damn Indians, or seventy miles to Buffalo Bend. More Indians and low-down whites—and a cow pool in each place. I signed up. Six of my men are still in jail, but the rest stopped dying. They learned to keep their mouths shut."

"And now," sneered Gray, "you still hope to get enough money to go home on and tell 'em in Texas what a damn fool you was!"

"Nope." Bullard's thin smile widened. "We're waiting for Christmas just to see what Santa Claus might bring. For entertainment we watch fools like you come. Now I'll get out my Sunday pants and be ready to go to your damn funeral!"

By the time supper was ready Grace Reboe had taken over the big wagon that had been turned into a house on wheels. Down on the flat the cattle were quiet, halted in rich grass. Alert men had been picked as night guards. With twilight the old cook served supper.

"They'll be coming back tomorrow," Bullard said. He sat with his back to a wagon wheel, a well-filled pan on his lap and a large tin cup of coffee on a flat rock beside him. "They'll be a nagging, gouging thorn in your ribs, knowing the politickers here will protect 'em, the scum thinkin' they're holdin' on to their votes." He sipped at his coffee. "They'll come ten or twelve next time, grinning and sneering, edging closer and closer, talking bigger and badder, and soon they'll be talking about direct persuasion.

"Each time they come there'll be more of 'em. Just a few bullies handling 'em. All others are in it only 'cause they're afraid not to be. Decent folks ain't got no protection from the kind of law that's here, as I've said. They don't want to be beat up, have store windows busted, their wives insulted on the street, and even their kids kicked around. If—*What the hell!*"

A fierce, choked wail had filled the air. The cook had just leaned over the fire to stir something in a pot. He stiffened with a grunt as the yell was followed by a crash from a rifle in the distance. Dropping everything, the cook staggered, then fell backward in a loose sprawl—a man dying with a bullet-hole through him as he struck the ground.

"And that," cried Bullard, throwing his pan aside, "is what they call direct persuasion!"

It was like startling wild birds into sudden flight. Everybody leaped backward, forward or to the right and left, cups and pans dropping or flung aside. A cowardly murder right here on the edge of town!

Grace Reboe had been first to finish her supper. Now she was first to seize a rifle and jump behind a wagon. All of them were like people trying to fight back at a bolt of lightning that had unexpectedly struck from the sky. Except that the crash of this rifle had come from the cattle cars on the siding, or from the pens, and the killer had vanished without a trace.

Horsemen came dashing up from somewhere beyond the depot. Singing and rocking in their saddles they swarmed on across the tracks, and turned toward the Missouri Queen.

"And that's always the way of it!" snarled Bullard, dropped to a squat behind a wagon wheel with a rifle in his hands. "Always one of them innocent-looking gangs popping up to confuse you while the killer gets away! Four of my men died! Meaner, lower and dirtier damned things never walked on two feet than any mob that'll work like that, and still they've got the nerve to call 'emselves men!"

"But," put in Grace, "those horsemen heard the shot!"

"Heard it?" Bullard snarled. "Hell, one of their gang fired it! They're the cover-up. Shoot one of 'em and the law'll brand it murder in this town! Law, hell! Only another breed of rats to protect the others! Nice to your face, then knives and bullets in your back from the dark. That's how my men and others died here!"

There was nothing they could do for the cook except to roll the body in a blanket, then wait for morning to dig a grave. Reporting a killing like this in Music Bluffs would have been only a waste of time. Bullard explained that the marshal would merely nod and shrug his shoulders.

As Boot Bullard raved in helpless fury Wilde and old Gray were silent. Unlike his usual fiery self, a gloomy calm had settled over Pearley Gray. But men who knew him best would have realized a storm was brewing.

"It's the showdown, Lance." A ghost of a smile moved old Pearley's lips, the rest of the face a granite mask. "A mite sooner'n we expected, but when blood has got to come I always want to see it gush and pour. Big as our herd is we'll need a few more men. Ten good men can whip a thousand outlaws like these here in Music Bluffs—if they'll only come in mobs. But they ain't going to do that. Know what I'm thinking?"

"Far ahead of you," Wilde's voice was low as he nodded. "Boot says there are at least twenty good men in jail."

"And every man aching to fight, yeah!" Gray's grin suddenly spread wide over his face. "Queer how you and me can think alike."

Neither warned the other to keep his thoughts to himself. Men who had had to fight most of their lives never needed that warning. After they had taken that beating from Axel MacGovern, there had been little talk about it until the time had come to even up the score. He had twice come into their camp before his raid, eating their food, drinking and warming himself beside their campfires. Not liking him from the beginning, merely listening to his big talk of having two fine herds ahead on different trails, they had kept quiet, every man guarding his own thoughts. Then when they had been caught without warning, whipped with little chance to fight, they had taken it without a whimper, and by their calmness until the time came to strike they had won, as far as getting the herd back was concerned.

Here in this hell-town they would finish it up. Axel MacGovern and his kind always took shelter in such places, hiding behind the outlaw mobs, swinging to them and taking a hand in their lawlessness, making themselves leaders if they could. Music Bluffs was an old, old story on the frontier where an entire town could be bled and wrung dry in ruthless hands.

A few cold-blooded killers could always round up a gang of bullies, who in turn could organize the rank cowards and the meek in a town, forcing them to do their bidding. As Bullard had said, not one man in twenty in town wanted any part of the lawlessness, but the majority had to follow the few like a herd of wild horses trailing a mean and dangerous stallion.

They tightened the guard around the herd, warning men to keep in hiding as much as possible, just as if they were in dangerous Indian country. With the fire

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £232 10s. Please send two more."
B. C., Tredegar, S. Wales. —*Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book,"* 1931

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AS LUCK BRINGER

Another writes: "Since the War my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck, and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan.'"

AS PRIZEWINNER

A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize, but I know that——, who won £2,000 in a competition, has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000, he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan.'"

AS HEALER

One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the Water from the lucky Well?"

AS MATCHMAKER

A young girl wrote and informed me that she had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has Joan the Wad.

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A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

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"SUNDAY GRAPHIC" PICTURE PUZZLE.

No. 175.—"Dear Joan the Wad, I received this week cheque for £71 8s. 7d. My share of the £1,000 Prize of the 'Sunday Graphic' Picture Puzzle. I have been near winning before, but you have brought me just the extra luck I wanted."—F. T., Salisbury.

WON £153 17s., THEN £46 10s. 3d.

No. 191.—"Genuine account of Luck . . . since receiving Joan the Wad . . . I was successful in winning £153 17s. in the 'People' Xword No. 178 and also the 'News of the World' Xword No. 280, £46 10s. 3d., also £1 on a football coupon, which is amazing in itself, as all the luck came in one week."—A. B., Leamington Spa.

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No. 195.—"My father, myself and my sister had the pleasure of winning a Crossword Puzzle in the 'Sunday Pictorial,' which came to £6 11s. 1d., which we put down to JOAN THE WAD, and we thank her very much."—L. B., Exning.

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No. 214.—"Arrival of your charm followed the very next day by the notification that I had won a prize of £13 13s. in a Literary Competition."—F. H. R., Wallington.

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No. 216.—"Since having received JOAN THE WAD I received cheque, part share in the 'Daily Herald' Picture Contest £3 1s."—M. E., Notting Hill.

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No. 222.—"Mrs. A. . . . , of Lewisham, has just won £30,000 and says she has a JOAN THE WAD, so please send one to me."—Mrs. V., Bromley.

FIRST PRIZE "NUGGETS."

No. 238.—"I have had some good luck since receiving JOAN THE WAD. I have won First Prize in 'ANSWERS' 'Nuggets.' I had JOAN THE WAD in February, and I have been lucky ever since."—Mrs. N. W., Wolverhampton.

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No. 245.—"I have just had my first win since having JOAN THE WAD, which was a 'DAILY MIRROR' HAMPER."—E. M. F., Brentwood.

WON "NUGGETS" £300.

No. 257.—"My Husband is a keen Competitor in 'Bullets' and 'Nuggets.' He had not any luck until I gave him JOAN THE WAD, when the first week he secured a credit note in 'Nuggets' and last week FIRST Prize in 'Nuggets' £300.—Mrs. A. B., Salford.

CAN ANYONE BEAT THIS?

No. 286.—"Immediately after receiving my JOAN THE WAD I won a 3rd Prize in a local Derby Sweep, then I was given employment after seven months of idleness and finally had a correct forecast in Picture Puzzle 'Glasgow Sunday Mail,' which entitles me to a share of the Prize Money." W. M., Glasgow, C.4.

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washed out right after the cook was killed, the big wagons stood like dark and waiting shadows. No candle burned in the wagon Grace Roboe occupied. As it grew nearer and nearer to midnight it was as though all the wagons were completely deserted, not a man around them letting himself be seen from the distance.

Following the rule of all frontier towns, Music Bluffs had waited until nightfall to really come to life. Two big buffalo hunters' outfits had come in late in the afternoon and camped in the west end of town. A twenty-wagon freighter gang from Montana had joined them at sundown. Now the dance halls, saloons and honkytonks were wide-open and would stay open until sunrise.

Fiddles wailed and music boxes clattered to the plunking of stringed instruments. Dancing feet pounded as if everybody in town were killing snakes. Out of the din roared scores of voices as bearded and hairy-chested bullwhackers and buffalo hunters tried to sing the rafters down. Now and then bursts of shots came from up and down the street, and men yelled drunkenly just to add to the noise.

The five men who stole away from Boot Bullard's wagons at one o'clock in the morning were like shadows, moving one after the other seventy or eighty yards apart. Going it afoot they slipped under the railroad trestle. They crossed the creek on the lower timbers, and moved on, each man with his six-shooters forward on his heavy belts and a carbine in his hand.

Wilde and Gray each carried a small crowbar they had taken from the wagons. Each of the others carried an axe.

CHAPTER V.

Hell's Loose.

Prepared for anything, Lance Wilde dropped beside a long-discarded freight wagon bed about fifty yards from the jail. Then old Gray was beside him, the others were dropping to the ground behind them, all eyes on the jail. A lamp was burning in the big office.

"Wall's more'n two feet thick, Bullard said," whispered Gray. "Made of oak switch ties and concrete, doors strapped with steel."

Wilde crawled on, trailed by the old man. Through a window of the jail they saw two big men at a desk in the office. Wilde with Gray behind him, moved on to the front door. To his surprise, it was unlocked. He swung it open quietly and stepped inside, a six-shooter filling each hand.

"Good evening!" He grinned. "Just leave your hands where they are on that desk and you won't get shot—maybe!"

"What the hell!" Both men started up, hands lifting. "Who—"

"Hands down on the desk!" Lance snapped. "I want your keys—all of them!"

"And their guns!" Gray said from behind him. The others had taken their places outside. "They're too damn handy at killing people from the dark!"

"But we haven't got all the keys!" one deputy protested. "Only keys for the lower floor! Marshal Tim Pool carries the upstairs keys in his pocket, and Tim's home in bed."

"Yeah." The other jail guard nodded. "Tim keeps all the real bad *hombres* upstairs."

"Hand over the keys you've got!" cut in Wilde. "And turn down that lamp! Take their guns, Pearley."

It was almost too easy. The two deputies were backed away from the desk. Gray stripped them of their weapons and found one small set of keys. Unlocking the door to the ground floor cell block, the two deputies were herded inside.

"Mostly drunks down here!" growled one of them. "Big stuff upstairs, I tell you!"

"One of you take this crowbar." The Cross B cowboy named Bender jammed it to them in the dim light of a lantern burning at the rear of the corridor. "Give the other yours, Pearley. We'll set them to work."

Only a few minutes later a shot sounded from in front of the jail. A yell lifted, another shot.

"Jail delivery!" bawled a voice. "Jail delivery!"

"Get the other men inside!" ordered Wilde. "Put out all lights and get every door unlocked!"

The upper corridor door was already open. With the two deputies snarling and cursing, Wilde drove them on to work on the locks of cell doors, the entire jail now buzzing with excited whisperings.

"Jail delivery! Jail delivery!" In the dis-

tance the voice was still calling. "Help! Help, everybody!"

"Hell's loose!" wailed another voice. "Hell's loose!"

And, at that moment, utterly oblivious to the fact that hell had broken loose, Axel MacGovern was where no man would have wanted to be disturbed. He was most comfortably sprawled back on the sofa in a large rear suite of the Missouri Queen. His boots were off, coat hung up, his little black string tie untied, and his collar open. A woman's hand was slowly unbuttoning his shirt, stroking the big chest. The full lips against his naked throat and the woman's warm breath were enough to make a man forget all things on earth except what was here in this elaborately furnished room.

Many men on the frontier would have held up a stage-coach or taken a fling at robbing the Overland Limited for a night in this room with its carefully drawn shades, fluffy pink curtains, sofa, and great feather bed where perfumed sheets had already been turned down, the lace-trimmed pillow slips fat and white in the lowered lamplight.

Other towns along the shining rails of the Union Pacific had their Missouri Queens. But only one could boast of such a silky, feline creature as Fronie Horner, one-hundred-and-eighty-pound madam supreme of the Missouri Queen of Music Bluffs. A man could forget all his troubles in the arms of such a blue-eyed buxom beauty whose strawberry-blonde hair reached from the crown of her head to her heels. Lying there in his lap, clad in only a black breeze of a thing and with high French-heeled mules on her feet, she was like a softly purring great kitten.

Fronie Horner was twenty-eight, Prussian somewhere in her background. She had everything. Nature had not stinted in her making. She was five feet, eleven inches tall, and every pound of the one hundred and eighty pounds was evenly distributed into womanly shapeliness.

Faro Jim Horner, the original owner of the Missouri Queen, had married her a week after she had stepped off the west-bound Overland one afternoon just two years ago. Ten nights later handsome Faro Jim had pitched forward on his face across a gambling table with a small black pistol's ball between the eyes, fired by a chicken-faced piano player called Smallpox Rennie.

Any man lucky enough or bull enough to get Fronie in his arms like this should have needed dynamite or blasting powder to jar his arms and hands loose. Yet tonight, right in the middle of the caressing, Axel MacGovern suddenly forgot it all and sprang to his feet with one wild lunge and startled grunt. Naked beauty in flimsy gauze and a cloud of golden hair spilled from his lap, hurled from her he-man cradle to sprawl awkwardly on the floor, with a surprised squeal.

"Sorry, Fronie!" he rasped. "Listen! Hear it? There's trouble! Something damned big is happening!"

"I have ears, Axel!" Startled from tingling desire to fear, Fronie Horner picked herself up and snatched a bright green-gold dragoned Chinese kimono from a chair. "Something always seems to happen when we are alone and trying to let the rest of the devilish world go by!"

"Sorry, darling!" He pulled her to him, holding her tightly, pawing her. But his eyes were wide as the noise grew to a thundering of shots, yells and running feet in the night outside. "It's the jail, Fronie!"

"Well, what of it!" she cried. She gave herself a sudden twist that jack-knifed him into a wide-legged sprawl on the couch. "Good riddance to one of the worst eye-sores on the frontier if they burn it to the ground! What's it your business, anyway?"

"Fronie, darling!" He sprang up, grabbing her again, long arms holding her tightly to him. "Damn it to hell, you can hear them yelling it's a jail delivery! That's danger to everybody in town!"

In spite of his pulling she got loose, and again pushed him back on the couch. "They say I am, too! Tim Pool's marshal of this town. If there's trouble let Tim handle it! If I let Pool or Dash Hanlon in here like this you can bet they wouldn't be in a rush to leave."

"If Dash Hanlon got after you"—he came surging up again—"I'd kill him! Or Tim Pool or any other damned man!"

"Better go kill them both!" She smiled, lips curling mockingly. "Dash has been after me ever since he came to town. Pool has wanted me from the beginning, and that goes for just about every other man who comes or goes in Music Bluffs. Sit down!"

"Honey," he half-groaned, slumping back, "I wish to hell we were out of all this!"

"The thing I begged for in the start, darling!" Her lips curled. "I didn't want you to make that last trip to Texas. I didn't want you falling in with Dash Hanlon. You wouldn't listen to a thing I said. Only in times like this will you half-admit that you've been a fool."

The noise outside was growing. The jail was behind the Missouri Queen, and the sounds of shots were soon so loud they might have been fired in a rapidly growing gun-fight straight below Fronie Horner's windows.

"It's just another fight." She was refusing to get excited about it. "As common as mules, oxen and horses, and men who smell like their four-footed creatures."

"Damn it, Fronie," he snarled, "how can you always be so hellishly calm?"

"Clear conscience, probably." Her smile was hard, but real this time. "And above all"—the mean little curl to her lips came back—"I don't have Dash Hanlon on my mind like you do. While we're at it"—she shrugged—"I heard not long ago that he's an ex-convict from Ohio. Let's have a drink! You need one, Axel."

She turned away to a large mahogany side table against the wall, but he was not in the mood for drinks. All his attention was still riveted to the noise outside. Under his breath he was cursing Dash Hanlon and his outlaw bunch. Hanlon, himself, had once said that things would suddenly blow sky-high some day or night. Men who were bossed by bullies who told them every move they were to make would stand for that only so long.

Revolt would inevitably come, and perhaps when it was the least expected. Men grew tired of all things, the good as well as the bad. Born trouble-makers could carry on and on, for a long time, driving weaker men before them and playing the parts of great and wonderful leaders. But at the first crack of guns when things were going against them they were always the first to break and run, leaving the weak and the stupid to face the music.

Axel MacGovern knew that already there were hints of revolt and growing trouble in Long Rifle, the frontier town eighty miles to the east. Seventy miles west trouble was brewing in Buffalo Bend. Dash Hanlon had admitted that only today. Once something started staggering the so-called Great Western Combine it would fall like sudden hail on a shake roof. Politicians would switch sides, for they were never men to be caught with their pants down if they could help it. A few telegrams sent to Washington and signed by the right men could stir up the political crowd in the nation's capital. Orders flashed to the cavalry stationed out here would bring troopers moving in, and no man wanted any quarrel with the army when it started taking over.

"Here's your drink." Fronie Horner had to stamp her high heels to make him turn away from the window where he was peering out through a narrow crack in the blinds. "Or put on your damned boots and get out of this room right now! Go down and join them—and get your fool head blown from its shoulders! I knew you'd sneak to the window the moment I turned my back!"

"How, oh *how*," he groaned, repeating, "can you be so damned calm in a time like this!"

"That"—she shrugged again—"is simple. I'm only in a rumpot-gambling house game, not the cow pool business. Drink this!" She shoved a tumbler of bourbon into his hands. "All of it. Maybe it'll put guts into your belly and some hair on your manly chest!"

"But—but," he stammered, staring at the big tumbler, "that's a full half-pint of the damned stuff!"

"Drink it!" she snapped, stamping her heels again. "Here's a glass of water to wash it down. Right at the moment, Axel, I don't know what I could ever see in you when there are so many real men for a real woman around. Only the snap of a finger and the baring of a shank would bring them running."

CHAPTER VI.

You Can't Fight the Army.

Gulping down the whisky, Axel MacGovern was suddenly leaping away from the window as splintering glass sounded and a stray bullet made a round milky hole in the pane, and buried itself in the jamb.

"That was lead!"

"Bullets come in," Fronie said, "every now and then, honey, when a fight's going

on out back. Just strays and no harm meant. Really—" she suddenly turned on him, fire in her eyes, hands fisted on her ample hips—"why should I worry about fools getting killed outside? Get your pants off and get to bed! You are not leaving me tonight if they burn the whole damned town down, my great big supposed to be he-man lover!"

"You said I was that—I didn't!" He tried to laugh. "The more I'm with you, Fronie, the more you amaze me! In a lot more ways than one. But just listen to it out there! What a fight! And you're not turning a single damned hair on your beautiful head! You're a braw woman, Fronie! More sheer nerve than any man I ever saw!"

"Save your breath, honey." Throwing her Chinese kimono aside she poured another drink, lamplight silhouetting her body through the black breeze of gauze. "You're going to need it. . . ."

By now the jail was a smoking, gun-blazing hell. Many of the powerful steel locks had held for a long time in spite of the prying of the short crowbars, and finally the furious pounding of axes. Scared, afraid of dying and knowing they could expect no mercy, the two deputies worked as if trying to save men from a burning house.

Men inside the cells had danced and shouted. A few had broken down to weep like children. They were bearded, long-haired, and unwashed for weeks on end. Many were but little more than hollow-eyed, sunken-faced ghosts. Thin soup had been their fare in a land where tons of buffalo meat was left rotting on the ground. Some had existed for long periods on bread and water for slight infractions of the rules, their evil-smelling clothing now hanging to them like loose bags on skeleton frames.

Once released from cells there was no holding them. Croaking like frogs, crying and cursing, they headed for the stairs. In the office they tore into the gun-lockers, broke down the doors of two closets filled with rifles, shotguns and ammunition. As soon as they could get to windows they opened fire on anything that moved outside in the darkness—crazed, wanting only to wipe out a town and every man, woman and child in it completely.

Wilde and Gray had told each of them just where to go if he got outside and had a chance to escape in the shadows. Some would probably die in blind madness to fight, but most would do as they were told. By making a fast get-away they would live to fight again.

All Music Bluffs seemed to have turned out in a rush on the jail to hold back the prisoners. Some men out there were shooting without knowing why. Mob psychology had seized them, and they were howling like apes while leaders of the Great Western Combine urged them on, using them as shields to save themselves from stopping bullets.

While it was a howling, shooting hell outside it was even worse in the jail. All lamps were out and there was no light except for the endless flash of rifles and six-shooters. Here and there double-barreled shotguns were roaring, their charges of buckshot and cut slugs of lead clearing alleyways and the roofs of houses.

"Sure is a good un, ain't it, Lance!" Pearley Gray, always the dancing old cooter in the middle of the hottest fight, could laugh now. "I ain't been so happy since my Uncle Jim was hung! But about the wagons, now." He suddenly sobered, looking out of a window on the upper floor. "Wonder if anybody's seen 'em on the move?"

"They're too busy for that, Pearley." A big six-shooter blazed in Wilde's right hand. An answering yell came from behind the old wagon-bed on the ground. "Bullard knows what to do!"

"Buffalo hunters — bullwhackers!" A voice that was like the far-reaching blast of a cavalry bugle was calling from the window of a cell downstairs. "Buffalo hunters—bullwhackers, don't take sides with them damn town crooks! This is your kind in this jail!"

Cheering lifted from somewhere as the voice kept calling, but Wilde and Gray were staring toward the trestle where Bullard's big wagons had been left behind. Gunfire was flashing on the high fill of the railroad.

"These damn cow poolers know it's us here!" Gray was popeyed now. "They've sent some of their crowd out to hit the wagons. Damn it, Lance, they'll kill Boot and the gal!"

"Watch the buffalo men!" yelled a terrorized voice in the distance. "Damn 'em, they're changing sides on us! Watch 'em!"

Moments later, with all cell doors open upstairs and down, men were pouring from their evil holes, racing outside, more than twenty screeching maniacs with guns. Men in alleyways, on roofs and behind the jail were suddenly fleeing as it became every man for himself. From somewhere another voice kept calling, bullying, coaxing.

"Into it, men, into it! Hold that jail! Hold that crowd! Don't let them get away! What in hell—"

"Somebody," Pearley Gray cried, right at Lance Wilde's heels as they raced down the stairs, "has shut him up! Looks like we're comin' around the bend, Lance!"

It was more than that. Once started in the right direction, all Music Bluffs seemed to swing into it. Men who had not had the courage to fight before were suddenly rising and grabbing weapons, human wildcats cursing the Great Western Combine at the tops of their voices.

It was as if Music Bluffs had been an open storehouse of high-explosives waiting for a spark of fire to turn everything into blast after blast. Hate was here, smoldering under the surface. With the jail delivery as an excuse it was all flashing into the open.

Racing toward the wagons with Pearley Gray and a bobbing string of men behind him, Lance Wilde suddenly threw up his hand and stumbled to a halt. Bearded and buckskinned hellions—buffalo hunters and freight haulers—were taking a hand where horsemen were sweeping from a ravine. Seven drunken rowdies, taken by surprise, were trying to flee, but the shots of infuriated men were tearing them down.

"Clean out Music Bluffs!" raged some townsman. "Clean it up while there's a chance!"

"Watch out for the train!" yelled another as a bright light came flashing along the tracks. "Damn it, it's a passenger train!"

"Look out, men, look out!" The warning soared up like the mournful cry of a steam calliope. "Hell a'mighty, it's one of them damn troop trains!"

A great groaning lifted. "Now why in hell did a thing like that have to come!"

"Yeah," wailed another man, "right when we was goin' strong!"

"Head for your holes, Great Western men!" shouted a scared leader from the safety of some rooftop. "Fall back, Great Western! Be good and loyal citizens now! You can't fight the United States Army. You can't fight the army!"

When morning came, Boot Bullard was like a man on the verge of crying because of the sheer futility of wasted effort. Again and again he bewailed the arrival of troops at such an inopportune moment.

"Why in seven balls of fire did they have to come!" he mourned. "They ain't never around when you need 'em! It's when they ain't wanted that they show up! Given just a little while more—just thirty or forty minutes more—and there wouldn't be no Great Western Combine left in Music Bluffs! They'd all be killed or strung to limbs down along the crick!"

"Keep your shirt tail down!" Pearley Gray was in high spirits enough to laugh at him. "Look what we've got this morning agin what we had last night when they killed your cook! Plenty of men to fight the damn troops if they ask for it!"

The wagons had been shifted during the jail delivery. Every man who had escaped jail was here now, only four prisoners having died in the fighting. In addition, there was another small herd of cattle and two sadly battered old wagons that had belonged to the unfortunate little Sam Miller. Eight New Mexico riders who had come with the cattle and wagons had joined the fighting force here on the south side of the creek.

Sam Miller, the hold-out, was dead, killed in that merciless dragging up and down the main street the afternoon before, but he was far from being forgotten. At midnight two Bullard riders had slipped away to the old man's camp north of the tracks and east of town, telling the eight loyal men there what to do.

A great physical change had come over Lance Wilde and all his men. Hidden behind rocks and brush, he and the men had taken icy baths in the creek just before dawn. They'd had close shaves, and Pearley Gray had done a fair job at trimming the trail boss' hair. Like his men, he was in new buckskins and everything else this morning, the same change having had a near-amazing effect also on his men.

Now it was a little, ready-to-fight army in itself stretched out on the flat. It was also out of the town limits of Music Bluffs. That meant it was subject to none of the brow-beating of the local court and its gang of shysters ready to take any kind of a case as long as the pay was high enough.

CHAPTER VII.

Lucky Two.

Still an eyesore to Boot Bullard, the troop train was on a side-track, coaches and horse cars lined up beside cattle pens. Horses were unloaded to be watered and fed at dawn. All indications pointed to the train's heading on toward Buffalo Bend later in the day.

Music Bluffs was quiet in the morning sunlight, its swaggering bullies keeping close to their holes, their thoughts on the troop train that could spread sudden destruction if aroused. Buffalo hunters and bull whackers had gone back to their wagons, fading in the darkness when the unexpected train had come rolling in with its engine's bell clanging.

Buffalo men could be quiet when it suited them. Those who were up and about now were shifty-eyed and silent, shaggy and bearded, lining up at the bars, but ready for any man's fight if he cared to bring it along. Six-shooters rocked at their hips, knives with twelve-inch blades were swinging pendulums down their hairy bellies. A thin tube of poison hung in a slender pocket in the sheath of each blade. Those little tubes offered a quick way to die and escape from hours of torture in the Indian country in case they found the jig up with them and the reds closing in.

"Them soldiers now," growled Pearley Gray, sipping a cup of hot black coffee by a wagon wheel, "ain't going to take no sides. This'll be a civil matter, not military, they'll say, and they'll keep out of it until they get direct orders."

"But"—Bullard frowned—"there's always somebody around these mean towns who can get them orders through by telegraft wires! Like horse thieves, politickers stick together. Have to. None of 'em ever knows when he's going to have to grab leather and run for it."

Lance Wilde and Grace Reboe were sitting under a small tree, having their breakfast on a flat rock that was like a low table between them. All fear had left the girl. She was doing her best to be one of this tough crowd, willing to share the ups and downs with the best of them. She had come through with flying colors, to make any fighting man proud of her.

"And you ought to have seen her driving that wagon!" Boot Bullard had told about it no less than three times. Now he was on the subject again as he talked to Gray. "Monkeys on the railroad shooting like hell at us. Bullets everywhere. Parting our hair and spitting in our eyeballs. And our little Grace up there on the seat fanning the leather into her team, getting that wagon out of there. If she was a man I'd say she had sand in her craw and hair on her belly!"

"Only, Boot,"—Gray was grinning, voice low—"you don't say them things about women. Just say she had wild hair on her front teeth and wild blood in her veins when them bullets started flying. That's more gentlemanish, like saying women glow, men perspire and horses sweat."

"You been to manners school, have you?"

Grace Reboe was watching the two men who were in such earnest conversation. "Lance," she said, "those two are plotting something."

"Most likely." He nodded with a smile. "Boot has taken a lot in this town. I imagine he's down to his last dollar and doesn't know where the next is coming from."

"But," she said quickly, "he'll have money from us from now on. We'll pay top wages for the use of his wagons or buy them outright and pay him dollar for dollar for them without questioning his price for them! I have twelve thousand dollars in those carpet bags of mine."

"Our thoughts seem to run in the same groove," he said, suddenly grinning at her broadly. "I still have a couple of thousand of Cross Bar outfit cash in my money-belt, and more in my saddle-bags, Grace. Something tells me things are going to be fifty-fifty from now on."

She colored to the roots of her fair hair. "I—er—of course you mean between you and Bullard?"

"Between Lance Wilde and Grace Reboe." He let her have it flat. "I'd like to have it that way, Grace. But wait." His hand moved quickly and caught her wrist. "Without any strings tied to it yet."

"Why—why, yes," she stammered, blushing scarlet. "Of course! Only—only that's not what I'm trying to say, Lance!" She looked straight into his eyes. "It's awfully nice of you, and—I thank you!"

"I'm a lucky man, Grace. More now than ever before."

"I'm lucky, too." She bobbed her head, swallowing as if a lump were in her throat. "If you hadn't come along just when you did, Lance, I—well"—she sat back helplessly, pulling her hand away from him—"I just don't know what might have happened to me!"

* * * * *

When Axel MacGovern met Dash Hanlon for breakfast in the hotel dining room at seven o'clock, both men looked as if they had been places and seen things that were too much for them.

"What a dry-squeezed bedbug you look like this morning!" Dash Hanlon growled at Axel. "But I suppose you've been in the voluptuous arms of your damned fat-tailed strawberry-blonde hell-cat!"

"Don't curse her, Dash! Where'n hell were you with all your grand leadership when the guns were going off? I suppose you were in Hell-in-Pants Maggie Murphy's great big fat-cow arms or mooing over the skinny buggy-shaft limbs belonging to Long-tooth Liz Halligan!"

"Shut your big trap, and sit down." Hanlon waved to a table.

Once they were seated he leaned forward his eyes bitter and searching as they stared into MacGovern's eyes. "I don't suppose anybody's got around to telling you eleven men died in this town during the fighting, and four more may not pull through."

MacGovern scowled. "I've just come downstairs!"

"Thought so!" snapped Hanlon. "But now you know what's happened. It looks damned bad for us, like we're losing our grip. The jail's locks are torn off the doors, and not a single damned prisoner left inside it. Just to help things along, a troop train is on the side track below the depot. Damned nice, along with the rest of it, isn't it?"

"You're doing the croaking." MacGovern had slumped back in his chair. "Go on with it. As the great leader and worker for mankind of the garden lizard variety, I'd still like to know where in hell *you* were when the others were getting killed?"

"Is that the only question you can ask?"

"It must be a honey," said MacGovern, "or you'd already be out with an answer. I don't give a damn who died or who didn't. You tell me to hold my horses, but I want those cows back from Lance Wilde. Why don't you tell me the cattle sprouted wings and flew away last night in the gunsmoke?"

"The cattle are not going anywhere, Axel," Hanlon assured. "Lance Wilde will have to feed his cowpunchers and pay all the bills. The cattle will be right there, waiting for us. Let this troop train get out of town. In the meanwhile"—he shrugged—"Big Tim Pool will get his jail repaired."

"You're so damned cocksure, Dash!"

"I know the game I'm playing!"

"And there's some," MacGovern said meaningly, "who are already wondering if luck ain't just about run out on us. Cross heard talk yesterday, and it wasn't good."

It looked as if Dash Hanlon was about to thrust his face forward and laugh. "Your half-brother did a peculiar thing last night. Damned peculiar, Axel!" He shrugged, his smile wicked. "And yet he could have joined a circus and traveled the world with his amazing act—if it had just worked out right for him so he could do it at will."

"Well, go on with it!" MacGovern glared. He knew something mean always was coming when Dash Hanlon played with his words and took his time like this. "Finish it, damn it!"

"Cross tried to stop a bullet with the bridge of his nose." Hanlon sat back in his chair, thumbs hooked in the arm-holes of his vest. "It didn't work out right. The ball went right on through and tore out the back of his head. "Not a pretty sight, Axel. His body's at the undertaker's. Better make your own arrangements for getting him buried. I'm inclined to think he'd do as much for you."

"You dirty rat!" For a moment it looked as if MacGovern meant to spring across the table. "You damned rotten, yellow-gutted coyote!"

Hanlon shrugged, hands flattening on the table. "Suit yourself as to your choice of epithets. Here comes the waiter. I think I'll have ham and eggs. As a starter a cup of coffee with a stout hooker of French brandy in it."

"We'll make it two on the spiked coffee!" snarled MacGovern. "Damn the ham and eggs!"

They hated each other heartily, these two men, and yet they needed each other. Like Cross White they had had other names in the past, Dash Hanlon at least

a dozen. Faster, more daring, than even MacGovern, Hanlon had had scores of dangerous experiences with the law, most of them in the Middle West. Chicago police and newspapers had long since branded him as a crook, the planning and executing engineer behind riots and almost open warfare in the streets and along waterfronts. Jails and penitentiaries had held him. In places he had had to flee for his life to escape the wrath of his own crooked gangs when they had had more than they could stand and had turned on him.

Out here in this wide and wild country, the smart, fast-thinking man could easily renew his fortune. People were people wherever one found them, always looking for quick and certain riches. He had started first in the town of Long Rifle, getting things set. A move on had brought him to Music Bluffs, then on to Buffalo Bend, then a switch-back here to put himself close to the center of his activities.

It had all been simple as long as a man watched his step. All he had to do was to stand clear of Federal law, never letting himself or his men tangle close enough to it to get caught. The military had its hands full trying to cower and beat back the Indians, a constant battling that had been getting nowhere toward a solution until the great slaughter of the buffalo herds had been started. There the white man was striking at the redskin's belly, a direct move to starve him into submission and force him to give up his lands where white settlers, trappers and gold hunters took a fancy to them.

Giving an order to have his breakfast delayed, Hanlon had a second coffee and brandy, toying with the second one while MacGovern finished a third and ordered a fourth. They were still arguing in low voices when Fronie Horner appeared, looking as fresh and bracing as the morning air outside the windows. Never a woman to spend the best part of a day in bed, she was in a smart, bright-blue dress with frills and ruffles, a garment never intended to hide her womanly curves.

"Keep your seats!" she ordered when Hanlon and MacGovern bounced to their feet like spry young mules ready for a race. "I'll take the chair in the corner."

"And coffee as a starter!" Hanlon bowed. "With a neat drop of cognac in it to brush away the clouds?"

"I have no clouds, Mr. Hanlon." She seemed a trifle heavy as she let herself down in her chair. "I usually awaken with a clear conscience. Yes"—she nodded—"the girl who takes care of me told me about it. She has keen ears."

"They didn't have to be keen last night." Hanlon leaned back in his chair. "But such things are to be expected when rustlers and other bandits come to town. You heard about Cross, or course?"

"All there is to be told or need be told, I suppose. And while we are about it"—she glanced sharply from Hanlon to MacGovern, and back to Hanlon, eyes hardened for an instant—"let's please hear no more about it at the breakfast table. I will take coffee and cognac, yes, Mr. Hanlon."

CHAPTER VIII.

Tough Cavalryman.

Hanlon ordered drinks when the waiter came. After that a strange, decidedly uncomfortable silence held among them—two men and a beautiful woman, each with little to say.

Something was wrong with Fronie Horner this morning. Dash Hanlon saw it in every glance she cast at MacGovern. The big raider had said or done something to Fronie, and she was not going to let him forget it until he somehow squared himself with her.

All three looked up with interest when the street doors opened. Two men in blue uniforms were coming, one a tall, broad-shouldered captain, the other a shorter and thinner lieutenant. Both removed their big campaign hats.

"The Army," whispered MacGovern, "seems to have arrived!"

"Odd as it might sound," Fronie Horner murmured, her eyes suddenly brightening, "I happen to know one of these officers—Captain Malcomb Timberlake."

"If you do," Hanlon looked at her quickly, voice a startled whisper, "and you'd handle it just right we might be back in luck again, Fronie."

"Meaning by that,"—MacGovern leaned forward, eyes bullets, tone low—"you'd have Fronie throw herself at the damned Army man and play him out!"

"Captain Timberlake!" Fronie Horner

was suddenly ignoring them both, her voice brightly lifted, all at once a smile on her face. "Think of seeing you here this morning!"

"Lord, take my eyes away!" The captain, the tall and dashing gay blade, was suddenly striding forward, spurred heels a musical jingling of golden rowels. A cavalry saber hung at his left side its silvered sheath glittering. On his highly polished belt rode a heavy service revolver. A man of action, this fellow, and quick to take command of any situation.

"Good morning, Fronie! You are as gorgeously, ravishingly beautiful as ever—and brighter than the Evening Star!"

"Hog wash!"

The words were from MacGovern, through his teeth. Instantly jealous, he might have added something else if Dash Hanlon had not glared him into silence.

"Delighted! Am I dee-lighted, darling, beautiful Fronie!"

Captain Malcomb Timberlake had come to a halt six feet away, a raw-boned dark man of forty with flashing steel-blue eyes, a long nose and a wide mouth filled with horsey teeth. He bowed like a knight of old confronted with his lady fair. MacGovern and Hanlon had come to their feet. They might have been only a rusty pair of tomcats standing on a back fence as far as Captain Malcomb Timberlake was concerned.

"Delighted, delighted!" babbled the captain. "*Dee*-lighted!"

"Captain Timberlake, how you flatter me!" To the glaring MacGovern Fronie was like some rancher's silly daughter after her first drink. "But you always did say the most wonderful things! Allow me to introduce Mr. Hanlon and"—she hesitated, damnably sweet—"Mr.—er—Mr. MacGovern, I believe."

"Glad to know you!" Timberlake bobbed his head, not at all interested. "Fronie, may I present Lieutenant Alvin Lovejoy?"

Lovejoy stepped forward, clicking his spurred heels together and looking as if a ramrod had been jammed up his tailbone as he bowed. "Charmed, I'm sure!"

"So nice of you to come just when you did!" Fronie Horner was amazing Hanlon and cutting Alex MacGovern to the bone. "These two gentlemen are—er—two of the town's leading business men and always in a terrific hurry. They were just going to leave me to have breakfast all alone. Now I'll breakfast with the Army!"

"And you might ask the captain," snarled MacGovern, "to bring his horse!"

"Sorry you two have to go." Timberlake seemed impatient for them to move on about their rushing business. "I suppose, of course"—there was the hint of a shrug of the big shoulders—"we will be seeing you around. Good morning!"

The glare from a tough frontier cavalry captain told two men to waste no time getting out of his way.

Dash Hanlon got MacGovern through a doorway before killing was done. They headed for the bar room, leaving Fronie and the two Army men alone in the dining room at this early hour.

"What did you do to make her like that?" Hanlon demanded as they sat down in a booth.

"A little argument before daylight!" snarled MacGovern. "Now she's acting like a damned bitch!"

"And," said Hanlon, smiling, "she is a bitch, professionally, in case no one has got around to telling you about it. Let's have another drink. Fronie'll make out all right. Won't surprise me to see her get his saber to hang on the wall as a reminder of what a certain variety of womanly charms can drag out of a man. Don't blame her. He walked right into it."

"I don't like the damned fish-faced bastard!"

"I'm beginning to believe it." Hanlon's eyes glimmered with deep amusement. "Damned if I'm not, Axel. But his kind like all women, and stout women—yeah, stout, I said—generally like his kind. But when I first looked at that long nose he had on him I thought of peanuts and elephants right off."

"His mouth reminded me of an alligator!" MacGovern snorted. "And—and Lovejoy! I'll bet his mother called him Alvey!"

"He's probably plenty of love and joy to women." Hanlon grinned. He was enjoying himself immensely. "Give him a chance. He's young, and on the frontier, and probably trying to follow in his captain's footsteps—or horse tracks."

"You wanted Fronie to do this, Dash!" MacGovern's big hands knotted into fists. "You deliberately put it in her head!"

"Yes, I did." Dash Hanlon set his jaws

and looked straight into his companion's eyes. "A good-looking woman with real brains in her head and with what else Fronie has to bargain with can buy an army, and if Captain Timberlake decides to take sides here we want him on our side."

MacGovern nodded grimly. "If he don't make her jump from under me and decide to let us both stew in our own juice!"

They argued on and on, having more drinks. Only a wall separted them from the dining room. Fronie Horner's voice came to them two or three times in outbursts of muted laughter. They didn't have to see her to realize that Fronie was doing all right.

Lieutenant Alvin Lovejoy was not only young and handsome. He was soon proving that he was smart, polite and considerate, a West Pointer and a gentleman. He had one brandy and coffee with them, then excused himself. His face was flushed scarlet, apparently from bashfulness. Only his tight, white lips indicated the pain from the rough kick of the tall captain's booted foot landing on his shin under the table.

"But you must go?" purred Fronie. "Surely you could stay and have breakfast."

"By all means!" agreed the captain, the icy fire in his eyes giving his voice the lie. "Don't hurry off, Lovejoy!"

"B-but I just remembered," stammered the lieutenant. "I forgot to diaper First Sergeant O'Leary!"

"Diaper a first sergeant?" Fronie Horner turned accusing eyes on the captain as the lieutenant moved away with a slight limp. "What did you do to him?" she remanded.

"Hang it, Fronie—" the captain's tone was low but hard—"you've always neatly managed to get away from me at the last moment. This time I'm damned if you do."

"Quite sure of yourself, aren't you?" Her eyes narrowed, her nostrils quivered. "There is just one bad thing about you, Captain Timberlake. Women are afraid of you. I have known a few who—well, I guess you know what I mean."

"There are none who are afraid," he said, scowling, "after they've known me."

"If half what I've heard is true," she retorted, smiling, "that is when they *are* afraid. . . . Here comes the waiter. If you won't mind, I'm ready for my breakfast now."

He was suddenly all smiles again, a warming light beginning to glow in his eyes. "And after breakfast how about a short canter? You used to ride almost daily when I knew you in Long Rifle. I have a lovely claybank saddler for you, Fronie. You'll adore him."

"You have a reputation for owning fine and fast horses, but why a short ride?"

"Because I don't know when I'll have orders to get a move on with that devilish troop train. A soldier is not his own boss, you know."

"Oh, I see." She was trying to show only casual interest. "Then if you're not going to make camp in Music Bluffs, where do you expect to go? Or would you know, not being your own boss?"

"Sorry, Fronie" There was a slight grind in his tone. "A man in my position can ill afford to discuss military affairs."

"My turn to be sorry, Captain." She gave him one of her sweetest smiles. "I should have known better."

They were slaying each other from the beginning and all through breakfast. Malcomb Timberlake was not handy at diplomacy when dealing with women, and especially one who stirred him to deep and dark depths. His unspoken thoughts were too quick to express themselves in his steely blue eyes, in the misplacing of a word, and sometimes in words entirely too direct. At a secluded table with a lovely companion he too often forgot himself in the straying of a hand or the shifting of an inquisitive knee. He was blunt when they were finishing their coffee.

"Of course I have a lady's saddle aboard the train!" he answered her question, grinning. "I believe in constant preparedness. In my humble opinion being ready for any situation is the hallmark of born aristocracy, of a gentleman and a soldier." He suddenly chuckled, pawing for her hand again. "How did such a beautiful creature as you ever get mixed up with a pair of toughs like the two who were with you when I walked in?"

The noise of several shots out in the street stopped any answer she might have made. Then, like a prolonged knocking, came the sound of something banging, crashing and rebounding from one end of a long hallway to another. With it came startled yells and of feet pounding along the board walk.

"A fight!" bawled a voice. "A fight!"

"Hunt cover, Pa!" shrilled some youth's thin, high-pitched cry. "It's the buffalo hunters!"

There was another blast, the noise of ripping and popping of planks being torn in quick succession from a resounding wall. A team of horses bawled and sawed back from some nearby hitch-rack, wheeling, to go snorting along the street with the clattering of a light wagon behind them and leaving a great, spinning banner of dust rising in the still morning air.

"It would seem," Captain Timberlake drawled, half-smiling, "the little fight I heard about last night is being resumed."

"Then you know about it?"

"Of course, Fronie." He shrugged. "Why wouldn't I when our train arrived in the thick of it, but—he shrugged again—"what would the frontier be without its fighting! Do we go for that ride?"

"You can still think of a ride," she asked, looking at him with big eyes, "when things like that are going on outside!"

"When you're around," he murmured and leaned closer, his voice low and tense, "I can think of a hell of a lot of things far more to my liking than being worried about a few uncivilized human flotsam having a little street fight. Damn it, Fronie!" His hand closed on her wrist in a suddenly all-possessive grip, making her wince. "Do you know the effect you have on me?" His grip tightened.

"Watch yourselves, boys!" bawled a voice in the street. "Here comes more of them damned Texans!"

"That," gasped Fronie Horner, "is Lance Wilde riding in! The gall of that killer!"

Other voices in the street were yelling now.

"Hunt cover!"

"Kill the Texas bastards!"

"Look!" Fronie was up, staring into the street and her voice was another gasp. "It —it's Calvern Grady who's been shot! One of the town marshal's deputies!"

CHAPTER IX.

Texans Ride to War.

In the middle of a third burst of shots the street doors crashed as if breaking from locks and hinges. They slammed open as if a bull were shaving his way inside. A tall and wide-shouldered man in gray was suddenly filling the opening, a lunging, white-faced and half-falling figure in great pain. Hanging on the side of his head and ready to fall was a broad-brimmed white hat. In his hands, dangling loosely and pointed downward on the ends of long limp arms, were a pair of six-shooters.

He jerked to a pause, trying to straighten and steady himself. He was too far gone for that. Staggering, he started falling, crashed into a table, body stiffening again for a moment, teetering drunkenly, then in a sudden wheel he was on the floor. With a yelp of terror the waiter headed for the kitchen.

"Fronie, come on!" Captain Timberlake was on his feet, pulling her up, a long arm whipping around her. "Let me take you to your room! This is no place for you!"

A bullet struck the side of one of the opened doors, splinters flying. The bullet came on, slapping along the side of the wall. It headed into a rear window, striking a cross-bar. In an eerie whine on and away in the outside air it left behind it a shower of falling glass.

"Must have been a buffalo rifle ball!" There was almost a happy leer in the captain's eyes, as Fronie hugged closely to his side. "Up the stairs we go and out of this! Just show me the way!"

"But they're killing men out there!" she cried, staring at the dying deputy on the floor.

"Lovejoy'll thrust out a few troopers and muffle it down." There was impatience in his tone. "It's a purely civil matter, after all."

"Don't!" she cried, suddenly. "What are you doing!"

For he had swung her into his arms, one big hand flat on her back and holding her bosom pressed to his brawny chest, the other clamped around her lower limbs.

"You can't—"

Another glancing bullet cut her short. It struck the leg of a table. In a clattering of glasses and silverware, the table heeled over.

"Watch the buffalo men!" wailed a voice in the street. "They're helping them Texans! Damn 'em, they're asking for war!"

Lance Wilde, however, had come to town early to avoid a fight. Swaggering gunmen in such towns rarely were in bed before dawn. Some were not to be seen until

three or four o'clock in the afternoons, when each left his honkytonk woman who gave him her money, her love, her faith, her often pathetic hopes for the future.

With the big crowd down on the flat to feed and clothing to buy for the most of the released prisoners, Lance Wilde had to have supplies. With Boot Bullard and ten carefully picked and heavily armed men, he had headed into town with three big empty wagons, leaving the quick-triggered old Pearley Gray in charge of the camp.

Grace Reboe also was along, because Lance had astonishingly learned from her that some of the loveliest of women could be as butt-headed as muley bulls, and were not to be left behind when they wanted something. Grace needed clothing, new garments, and she was going to get them.

"Unless," she had told Wilde sweetly, but with a mocking glint in her eyes, "you know how to buy. Quality, sizes, colors, all that. And of course how to get a fit in footwear without a pair of feet to try them on."

Then she had gone into her big wagon, to avoid further argument.

"Though it's dangerous," old Pearley Gray had put in, "Lance, I think the gal's got something. You can buy things for men, but hell's fire, Lance, even a woman's drawers are different to a man's! They've got lace on 'em, and some gals even squirt cologne in 'em."

"That's a fact," Bullard had agreed, sidling up to them. "I'm a jasper who knows. I've had several women, eegitimate an' uneegitimate. I lost one, once, for buying her some purty red flannels with fancy-wove cuffs on the bottoms of 'em to keep her ankles warm when the Texas northers blew. This half-moon scar on my forehead marks the night I got home with 'em. A meat skillet filled with bacon and grease. She was gone with a long-eared cowboy at daylight, and I ain't seen her since."

"Don't both of you take sides against me!" Wilde had tried to argue. "You know it's dangerous to take her!"

"Dangerous to drink water, too." Old Gray had nodded with a sour little smile. "Never know when you're going to suck up a bellyful of some sickness at a waterhole or crick and have to die in bed with your boots off."

"It may be a wild goose chase, anyhow," Bullard warned. "People may be afraid to sell to you. All Dash Hanlon has to do is pass the word, and men who'd like to sell won't dare, but we'll see what we can do at Hankin's General Store. It's got everything for women and men."

Lance Wilde had not come to town for another fight, yet he had known he was as good as asking for one. His plans were made. He knew what he was going to do, and had discussed things with the girl, Gray, Bullard and a young, clear-eyed redhead named Art Preston who had come with the New Mexico cattle and wagons.

Preston and young, cool-headed blond, Bob Kinsburn, a Wilde rider, had been dropped out of one of the wagons as they passed below the depot. They would quietly glide aboard the morning eastbound due at eight-thirty. By the middle of the afternoon they would be in Rattleweed, eighty miles east of Long Rifle and out of reach of the cattle pool mob here.

"And in Rattleweed, they'll get busy with telegraph wires," Wilde had explained. "No one will stop them in Rattleweed, like Boot says messages are held up here and often not sent at all. If the railroad fails us, then, damn it, we'll begin our long drive and fight our way to the cattle markets through anything they can cook up for us."

Everything had been quiet when they reached town until the first burst of shots was fired. Men and wagons trailing behind, Wilde had the girl to his left, Boot Bullard on the other side of her. They headed for the general store, a big log-walled two-story structure surrounded by hitch-racks and loading platforms which jutted out into vacant lots on either side of the store.

A score of early-risers were on the sidewalk. Watching them like hawks, neither Wilde nor Bullard saw the four squatting, tense-faced gunmen ahead. Having seen Wilde and his men coming they had jumped into sudden hiding behind a wagon and a team of grays at a hitchrack in front of a narrow passageway between two big plank-walled buildings.

Still smarting from the sting of defeat the night before, it was a four-man bid to become heroes. As if they had planned it long before, one man at a time was suddenly swinging to his feet, cocked six-shooters in each hand tilted upward. As the first two six-shooters sent their roaring high in the air, the man who fired

them suddenly twisted around from the tremendous striking force of a rifle bullet shattering his hip. That unexpected shot was fired from behind a stack of cross-ties on the other side of the railroad.

"Some of the buffalo hunter boys are on our side!" cried Bullard, his horse rearing and lunging. "Low on this side of your saddle, Miss Grace! There's Deputy Calvern Grady! Watch him, Lance! He won't be for us!"

It was noise and guns all at once. Neither Bullard nor Wilde saw where the wide-shouldered man in gray under a wide hat had come from. It must have been out of that narrow passageway. They saw his two six-shooters coming upward. It never was certain whose side Calvern Grady was going to take. A triple-thundering of long old buffalo rifles came from behind the distant pile of cross-ties, spinning the deputy marshal around and rocking him back against the corner of the passageway. Still reeling, looking like a drunk about to fall, he started running and weaving on along the sidewalk. A stumble turned him into the front doors of the Missouri Queen's dining room, and out of sight.

Lance Wilde fired one shot, and saw a man drop behind the wagon just before the horses surged back, tearing down the hitch-rack and wheeling to go clattering the wagon away, a banner of dust behind it clouding everything. Under the wagon, foot caught into something, dragged and bounced a figure that had been one of the hiding gunmen.

"Don't worry about the buffalo hunters!" Boot Bullard yelled as his horse started pitching him up and down in the saddle. "I—know—some of 'em, Lance!"

The others behind Wilde and Grace were swinging forward, hawks of the saddle trying to get into the thick of the mêlée. With one gunman downed by Wilde, another by the buffalo hunters, and one being dragged away under the wagon, the remaining two were rushing for the mouth of the passageway. A burst of shots that seemed to come from everywhere at the same instant cut one of them down at the entrance to the passageway, head and shoulders inside it, the rest of him a pain-twisting form on the sidewalk.

Yells seemed to fill the town. Wilde, the girl, the wagons, and his men were moving on, the cowboys milling around, Bullard in the middle of it all trying to fight it out with his horse gone crazy under him.

It was like that for four or five blasts of shots, some of them coming from windows above the sidewalk as if for no other reason than to add to the din. The street had cleared almost at once, men and women running, ducking and dodging—everybody trying to find shelter at the same time.

In the last lull, Bullard managed to quiet his horse as a Texan swung in beside him. Wagons and men moved right on, every man still full of fight but abruptly finding that there was nothing left to fight. Only a voice came to them, raging, full of hate, the stentorian voice of some man hidden on a roof top.

"Round up the gang! Round up all the gang! We'll get them Texans to the last damned man before they get out of town!"

CHAPTER X.

MADMAN.

FAR-LIFTING and far-falling notes of a cavalry bugle splintered the lull, other noise dropping swiftly away. For a few moments after the last note of the bugle died away, only a breathless hush seemed to grip the town. A Texas cowboy broke the silence by a laugh that was like the braying of a mule.

"Now, by hell, they're calling out the army!"

"That was only 'cease fire!'" yelled another Texan. "Hell's fire, I ain't forgot my cavalry days!"

In the saloon where MacGovern and Dash Hanlon were in deep consultation, the reaction was vastly different. On hearing the first flurry of shots, Axel MacGovern, suddenly too excited to give Fronie Horner another thought, leaped to his feet, yelling "You've lost your grip on the crowd, Dash!" and made a startled rush for the front of the bar-room, Hanlon right behind him.

They halted at a safe distance from a window to stare out into the street, seeing without being seen, each afraid of stray bullets.

"I thought you said you were holding things!" growled MacGovern.

"And I thought I was!" In Hanlon's face was both anger and fear. "Damn it, some-

body's taken it upon himself to act without my orders!"

MacGovern curled his lips. "Maybe a new leader, eh? Such things do happen mighty sudden in this business, Dash."

"No damned man's cutting in on me!" Hanlon growled. "Here's some of the boys now."

Four men had come hurrying in through a rear doorway, big lumpy-faced fellows who looked as if they had never had half enough sleep.

"Who started it out there?" Hanlon demanded.

"Don't know," a man named Ira Spank answered him. "Me and Joe Twill just run into Erb Light and Handy Parker out back. Here comes Big Tim Pool. Maybe he can tell you something."

"I can't tell him a damned thing!" In spite of his morning shave and well-fitting suit Tim Pool was short-tempered and looked as if he had not had enough sleep either. "I just came from home. What started it, Dash?"

"That brazen damned Wilde and his cowhands!" Hanlon exploded. "Riding in, armed to the teeth and looking for trouble after what was done last night! Axel had just said I'm losing my grip on my gang. That's a lie! You can make any men fight if you do what Wilde did! Best thing you can do is throw him in jail!"

"And"—Pool leered—"you'll help me, of course!"

They could venture onto the street now with Big Tim Pool to lead the way. Wilde and his crowd had gone on, and soldiers were pouring off the troop train as if in quick answer to the bugle call.

When they reached the sidewalk, two dead men lay there. One was flat on his face, the other lay with his head and shoulders in the narrow passageway, the rest of him drawn into a knot.

Wreckage of the broken hitch-rack lay on the body of a third gunman. Marks of wagon wheels and hoofs on him showed where the runaway team had gone lunging over him.

Wilde and his outfit were already turning in at the general store, alert, and apparently still ready for fight or frolic.

A fourth dead man lay where the runaway wagon had dropped him, a broken, battered bundle of flesh and bones in a growing pool of blood. Above it hung a cloud-ring of dust, the morning sunlight making it a shining halo.

Only a strung-out line of soldiers had piled off the troop train. One look was enough to tell Big Tim Pool that no real move was going to be made yet.

"There's another dead 'un in the dining room yonder!" A little gopher-faced man touched Pool's sleeve. "It's Deputy Marshal Calvern Grady, Marshal Pool!"

"Grady!" Pool's eyes popped. "Hell!"

He moved quickly to the dining room doorway, followed by Hanlon, MacGovern and the four big gunmen who had come into the bar-room. Hanlon was passing quick signals to other men who were appearing, tense-faced. At the doorway of the dining room he stopped, catching MacGovern by the arm.

"Here comes Lieutenant Lovejoy!" he muttered.

"Damn *him*!" MacGovern pulled his arm free. "Handle him yourself." He had just remembered Captain Malcomb Timberlake and Fronie.

Inside the dining room he was not interested in the dead man lying there in a bloody pool beside a table. For one glance at the table where he had been sitting told him that Fronie and Timberlake were not there. He turned to the waiter who had ventured back from the kitchen.

"Where the hell did they go?" he demanded, his hand a gripping talon on the man's shoulder. "No damned lying now!"

"I wouldn't know." The waiter gave a quick twist and pulled away. "Upstairs, I reckon."

"She wouldn't dare!" MacGovern pushed on past him. "Or—or would she in the mood she was in?"

He went up the stairs quietly, face grim. At the end of the hallway before Fronie Horner's door he came to a halt, mouth flying open and his eyes widening. Fronie's voice came to him, near-breathless with fury.

"You're not a man! You—you're a damned beast! No! Don't!"

"Damn it," said Timberlake's angry voice, "you've played me for a sucker long enough, Fronie. You—"

"Stop that. No! You—you're a damned beast, I tell you! That dress cost me eighty dollars! You—you—you—"

Big Tim Pool heard that way downstairs.

He heard the door break in and fall from a furious kick. People were pouring into the dining room by this time, staring at the body of the dead deputy marshal on the floor.

Hanlon was still outside talking to Lieutenant Lovejoy. But even they must have heard the noise from the upstairs, for they bolted into the dining room, white-faced and questioning as they skidded to a halt just inside the door.

Hell was to pay upstairs. A woman was screaming in terror and at the top of her voice, words pouring from her in an endless stream, so close together no one could have made any sense out of them. Above her screaming came oaths from heavy and hoarse men's voices.

Aside from the noise the woman was making there was the noise of smashing chairs, banging furniture and upset tables. Fighting with all the fury of maddened jungle beasts, two men came tumbling out of the broken-in doorway. Then they were fighting in the hall, knocking, battering, cursing, each bent on beating the other to death with his bare fists.

Men below gasped and stood in awed terror as the pair reached the head of the stairway. Twisting, battering, they were going down in a clinch. Axel MacGovern was on top for just a second as they hit the floor. Right fist a bloody powerful maul, he sent it smashing down into the captain's bloody face. Then Axel MacGovern was hurled upward, big hands clinging to him, a driving knee in his stomach.

"Here they come!" yelped a voice below. The crowd surged back out of the way. "That's a fight!"

"Damned if it ain't!" cried a little buck-toothed man, as he backed away. "And would you look at 'em! Why, one ain't got no pants on!"

It was a rolling, bounding pair now, two men locked together in a bloody-faced and bloody-fisted ball. The railing of the stairs crashed, cracked like bundles of exploding firecrackers. A section of it came down on the dining room floor in splintered wreckage. The human ball bounced on, rolling, tumbling.

"That's Mr. MacGovern!" cried a screechy voice. "But who'n hell's the other feller?"

No one answered him. The two were still bouncing right and left on the stairs, hitting the wall, cracking and violently trembling another section of the railing. In a last bounce the human ball hit the foot of the steps, kicking and spreading out into two desperately fighting men again.

"MacGovern's on top!"

"No! God, *no*!" The voice was that of the man under MacGovern. MacGovern's big hands clawed his face. "Stop him! Help! Damn him, he's tearing my eyes out!"

"Damn you," whistled MacGovern's breath, "I'll tear your heart out and throw it in your face!"

Tim Pool and Lieutenant Lovejoy reached them an instant later. They grabbed the mad MacGovern by the shoulders, hurling him away in a backward somersault. On the floor lay the sobbing, cursing Captain Malcomb Timberlake, hands to his face and blood pouring in streams from his eyes.

"Damn him—damn him—damn him!" he moaned. "The man is mad! God, what has he done to me, what has he done to me!"

"Let me at him!" Axel MacGovern was back on his feet, body in a crouch, big arms swinging, the age coming in to finish the bull's kill. "Lemme finish the high-headed Army bastard!"

"No, Axel, no!" Fronie came flying down the stairs, mostly in rags and strings, little left to the imagination with so much nakedness showing. She rushed to MacGovern, throwing her arms around him. "No, Axel, no! I love nobody but you, darling! Nobody but you!"

"Get the crowd out of here!" roared Big Tim Pool. "And close all the doors!"

"Damn him—damn him!" moaned the captain on the floor. "He's a madman!"

"I was only playing him!" Fronie Horner wailed, trying to muffle the bloody snarl of MacGovern's face into her bosom. "I knew you and Hanlon wanted the troops on your side."

"Get away from me!" MacGovern suddenly gave her a furious shove. She went backward with a scream and in a rolling fall landed on her back and shoulders.

"Let me at him!" The madman was coming forward again, crouching. "I want his heart!"

Fronie screamed a warning to MacGovern, She was not quick enough. Dash Hanlon had popped behind MacGovern. A black-

jack lifted and fell on MacGovern's head. With a grunt Axel MacGovern went down and out on the floor.

CHAPTER XI.

A Killer Kills.

With the morning eastbound now steaming into town from Buffalo Bend the Hankins General was enjoying a business boom. Four clerks were busy with Lance Wilde and Boot Bullard as they bought clothing and loads of food supplies. Two old maids were joyously clucking like happy hens with Grace Reboe who was doing her buying in the section planked off for women's apparel. Grace seemed to be buying everything in sight that was near her size.

Wilde had men watching the town, not to be taken by surprise. None of them knew what was going on in the Missouri Queen; none of them particularly cared. Buffalo men who had taken sides with them had disappeared, but still ready for anything else that might happen. A tall, hook-nosed cowboy by the name of Crowe finally sidled up to Bullard.

"Musta been a fight uptown," he said, keeping his voice low. "Looks like the cavalry boys are interested in it. Soldiers keep pouring off the cars and all head across the street."

"It ain't none of the Army's business," Bullard growled. "Not unless direct orders come through. Just keep watch, Crowe. We'll have trouble yet, but we may fool 'em if Lance'll listen to me."

Crowe went back to watching from just inside the front doorway. Bullard continued buying, the supplies mounting as if they were to strike out on a long, long trail. Purchases were piled on hand-trucks and wheeled out on the platforms to be loaded into the big wagons.

"Soldier got hurt." Crowe was back in ten minutes. "Two soldiers was leading him back to the troop train. Had a white handkerchief tied around his head and across his eyes. Big feller. Must of been an officer."

"Just keep watchin'." Bullard was frowning now with impatience. "We ain't got too much longer if the gal ever gets done with her buying."

Crowe had started to say something else when a sudden shot from somewhere along the street cut him short. Crowe wheeled, heading back to his post.

"What now?" Wilde came up to Bullard, his buying just about finished. "The crooks been fighting among themselves?"

"My hope same as yours, maybe. Killing off each other would save us the job and some of our men having to die doing it."

He didn't mention what Crowe had told him. It seemed of no importance right now. What was important was getting the wagons loaded and getting them back to camp safely, so he made a suggestion to Wilde.

"Let's not go back the way we drove in, Lance. No use in putting ourselves and the gal in more danger. Let's head straight on over the tracks, down across the crick, then along the flat and back to camp. Ain't no use in asking for a fight on the street with them having the houses to take shelter in."

"There's a better way than that, Boot." Wilde's brows were thoughtfully knitted. "We'll head straight west for better than a mile. With this big building here behind us we'll get beyond the range of high-powered rifles before they can start things if they want to try. If we swing straight south from here we're apt to get raked by gunfire from every roof top in town."

"That's a better plan, yeah!" The old man nodded. "We've got to look out for roofs on both sides of the track. I'd forgot 'em."

They were heading out forty minutes later, just as Wilde wanted it. Buffalo hunters in the distance looked disappointed, eager to get back into another fight and seeing their chances slipping away. From somewhere behind them that same thought seemed to be in the minds of some men on the roof tops, because they heard a protest:

"Cow-a-ards!"

Grace Reboe looked quickly at Wilde. "I suppose you're willing to say you feel like that?"

"Because we're giving them the slip?"

"No." She smiled. "Because you're doing this for a woman, for me! But I'm glad." She reached over and put her hand on his arm. "You're surely looking out for me, Lance!"

"There's still one great and wonderful thing about Axel MacGovern." He leaned over, putting his hand on her saddle-horn and looking steadily into her eyes. "I'll always have to thank him for the fact that without him I might never have met you. I've got it bad, Grace. It gets stronger and deeper each time I look at you."

She nodded soberly, avoiding the steady eyes for a moment. "You were sincere when you talked about that fifty-fifty deal between us!"

"Did you doubt it?"

"No, but I don't like fifty-fifty propositions, Lance." She was looking straight ahead. "I knew I wouldn't let it be like that when you mentioned it, but I kept silent. I'll never play fifty-fifty with any man, Lance."

"No?" He rocked back straight in his saddle, face a puzzled frown. "Grace, I was beginning to think—"

"Just leave out all talks of splits, Lance," she cut him short. "When I throw my lot in with a man's it's going to be all the way and nothing on the side."

"Grace"—he was looking at her with suddenly hungry eyes—"you're a Texan, and a Texan can speak straight out. Could I be that man?"

"Possibly." She had both hands on her saddle-horn, gripping it, and still staring straight ahead. "It all depends on you. With me it was a foregone conclusion before I had known you twenty hours, Lance."

"Grace!" He reached for her. "You—"

"No!" She swung away from him in her saddle. "Not right here with everybody staring at us!"

"Oh!"

That one word was from behind them, desperately half-screened from lips drawing in a last breath of agony. Peter Kelley, a red-headed and freckle-faced young Texan shot upward in his saddle, body bending backward. Raked by a spur, his horse snorted, lunged, and the young fellow tumbled out of his saddle, dying from a bullet through his heart before he could land on the ground.

"Damn it," wailed Bullard, "it was a bullet from the roof of the Hankins General! Somebody was on top of that store while we was buying out things! Scatter out!"

No one seemed to have heard the first bullet. A second one came with a furious screaming in the air. Lance Wilde's voice came with it, his horse making a lightning turn.

"Go on with the wagons like we planned, Boot! Go with them, Grace! I'm going to get that killer!"

"There's more'n one!" bawled Bullard as a third and fourth bullet whistled over them. "Five of you men swing back with him! Not everybody! *Five,* I said *five*!"

* * * * *

"Get the man who did this to me!"

Helped back to the train, and with an army doctor now working over him, Captain Malcomb Timberlake was trying to get a grip on himself. The pain in his eyes was still maddening in spite of all the doctor could do to ease him.

"I didn't intend to take an immediate hand in the affairs of the ruffians of this town," the captain went on painfully, "but now I'm going to clean it up. Round up the whole mess! Get that man who did this to me, and bring him here! You heard me, Lovejoy. Don't stand here like a brass-buttoned jackass, even if I can't see you!"

"Yes, Captain, I'll get him—fast!"

Lieutenant Lovejoy turned on a heel. Outside as he dropped to the ground from the steps of the coach he snapped orders right and left. Twenty troopers who seemed to be only waiting for those orders immediately fell into a line behind him, revolvers and cavalry sabers swinging. But even as they started for the street a thundering noise from the west end of it halted the lieutenant.

It was gunfire from the roof of the Hankins General. Beyond the big store horsemen were wheeling, racing back toward the store. Then as gunfire on the roof suddenly ceased, Lovejoy saw three coils of rope flung over the edge of the roof. Three men with rifles appeared, all in a desperate hurry. Each seized a rope, and they began dropping like plummets.

They struck the ground, and were whirling away from the store when a heavy rifle crashed its report from a group of big wagons to the north. One fleeing man clasped both hands to his mid-section, and plunged forward on his face. As the other

two fled on across the vacant lot, the rifle again crashed, and before they had bobbed out of sight in the doorway of an old blacksmith shop, a wild screech lifted from one of them.

"Go tell those riders what happened, Corporal Miller!" Lovejoy yelled. "One of those monks shot somebody from that roof!"

Everything was confusion for a few moments. More troopers were pouring from the train, guns shining, all trailing out after Lovejoy and the first group of soldiers. Into it raced a tall Texan on a horse—Lance Wilde—and behind him five more riders. Standing in Wilde's right stirrup, with one of the Texan's arms around him to steady him, was Corporal Miller.

Bombshells exploding could not have caused more excitement. All that had happened before was no more than the popping of a few firecrackers compared to what was happening now. Startled men were scattering in every direction, racing out rear doorways, running for horses—anywhere but here in the thick of the storm of danger in the town.

Wilde pulled up in front of the Missouri Queen, letting Miller drop to the ground. He was dropping out of the saddle when he glimpsed three horsemen swinging up out on a ravine on the north side of the tracks. As they started racing away, hurrying riders on the tracks at the railroad trestle came popping up, and in the distance Wilde recognized old Pearley Gray with ten men behind him.

Gray was swinging down from the tracks, cutting off the three fleeing riders, turning them back. Not until they turned did Wilde recognize Axel MacGovern and Dash Hanlon. The third was Big Tim Pool, but Wilde did not know him.

MacGovern swung toward the depot, a madman in the saddle who saw the way blocked by the cattle pens and the troop train. He swung back to the right, hurrying northward, the two behind him addled and scared, their spurred heels digging, their long bridle reins furiously rising and falling.

Lance Wilde raced into an alleyway to cut them off behind the buildings. His one big chance had come! Corporal Miller had told him what had happened to the three men from the roof of the Hankins

PSORIASIS

Whatever the extent, and it may be anything from two or three small spots on elbows and knees to large patches on the scalp, body and limbs. Psoriasis is always most distressing and embarrassing to the sufferer.

Psoriasis forms a white lustrous scale on a reddened area of skin. Both the scale and skin are always dry unless broken or brought away by too much force when scratching or combing.

In most cases the reddened skin is of a normal temperature and the scale thick and raised on the skin, especially on the scalp, elbows and knees. Where the skin is of finer texture as on the body, scaling takes place as thin flakes or a light powder. In severe cases all the scales—thick, thin, flake or powder—will come away in shoals.

The onset of Psoriasis varies considerably. It may be hereditary, may occur with puberty, may follow injury, exposure, shock, worry, faulty nutrition or faulty elimination. It may also be persistent and recurring, and sufferers despair of ever having a clear, healthy skin.

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No matter how long you have suffered, no matter how many eruptions you may have, no matter how extensive the eruptions may be, the brochure will bring renewed hope of a clear and healthy skin. It tells of others who suffered for years but have had complete relief. Psoriasis that was very extensive and persistent yielded to a skin without blemish.

Think what a healthy skin means to you. No unsightly scale, nor distressing patches or redness, no irritation and no more embarrassing anxiety when you are at work or with your friends. With a healthy skin you can work with pleasure; you can join freely in sports, recreation and social activities with your friends; you can dress with pride; you can share the freedom and happiness of holidays, a new life is opened out to you.

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General. Two of them were dead one by the wall of the store, the other sprawled in the doorway of the old blacksmith shop. Hunting the third would be like chasing a rabbit in a cactus thicket.

Dash Hanlon was the leader of the herd-grabbers here, the man behind all of the plot to cheat cowmen out of their rights through the vicious cattle pool he headed. Axel MacGovern, even if out-and-out rustling could not be proved in court on him, since he would lay the blame to the Indians and squawmen, was deep in the mire with Hanlon. Putting those two out of it would make all the rest of the bandit scheme die a natural death, and the troops now taking a hand would make it a certainty.

MacGovern was leading the three who were trying to escape, his hands and face still bloody. Clawed low over his saddle-horn, he began screeching and shooting as soon as he recognized his pursuer. Wilde's first bullet must have burned him across the shoulders, making him lurch in the saddle, but like a crazy man he was shooting with both hands.

Wilde's second bullet turned him in the saddle just as Dash Hanlon and the man behind him whirled into view from beyond a low, sod-roofed hut. MacGovern's lips were stretched in a wide grimace that showed all his teeth, his eyes protruded, his face was like chalk through the smeared blood. A third shot as Wilde swept straight in on him turned him all the way to one side in his saddle, leg flying over the cantle. For a moment a dead man was standing in one stirrup, six-shooters still clenched in his hands, that inhuman grimace on his face, then he slipped and fell.

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Dash Hanlon and the other man had wheeled back. It was suicide to go on. Pearley Gray was sweeping in on them, the cold, deadly old gray devil rocking and shooting from his saddle as the men behind him opened up. Then Hanlon and the other men were done, flopping figures falling, their horses racing on. Atop of them swept old man Gray, reeling, shooting—certain death when once turned loose in a gun fight. . . .

Five nights later Pearley Gray sat with his back to a wagon wheel, talking in a low tone to Boot Bullard. Above them the cold Wyoming stars were white jewels blinking against a black velvet background of sky.

"Why, hell, yes," the old man said. "Wipe out the leaders of any crooked bunch and you've wiped out the lot. Gangs are only damned sheep, a few behind 'em kicking 'em in the pants and getting all the money while the monkeys do the dirty work."

"I ain't interested in 'em no longer," growled Bullard. "Tomorrow there'll be be more cattle to load and ship, and I don't like this damn cooking job I've degenerated into. If Captain Timberlake would have me I'd join the cavalry."

"Some say he won't be in the cavalry much longer." Gray stared into the dying fire. "One eye won't never see agin, and the other'n maybe never too good. But he don't seeem to give a damn whether he's got eyes or not. He's got Fronie Horner. That means he's got the Missouri Queen, and that the jack-pot."

"If the mare only stays with the stud!" Bullard said wisely.

Pearley Gray grinned. With creaking joints and one gnarled hand on the wagon wheel for support he pulled himself to his feet. "She was lookin' for a fine stud when he came along. Just had to get used to him." He nodded toward a big covered wagon under a lone, wide-spreading tree. "Ain't that the quietest damn thing you ever saw? Two days ago Lance married her, and damned if they don't hug to that wagon like cold cats to a hot rock. Act like they've found a gold mine inside of it."

"Some day, Pearley"—Bullard pulled himself up, grimacing from backache—"you may be old enough to know they did. Let's hit the buffalo robes. Breakfast comes early."

VIGILANTE VALLEY

A Novel by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

Bonnie was holding the rifle that belonged to the honest cowman they had hanged!

CHAPTER I.

Return to Contention.

YOUNG Dave Mathers had been gone from the Tumblebug range for over a year. Now, riding back into the town of Contention, he saw that there had been no change. Not that he had expected any. Tragedy had come to the Tumblebug and more lay ahead, but Contention, a tawdry, weather-beaten cowtown, controlled by the sly maneuverings of the banker, Ira Runyan, remained the same.

Dave reined up in front of the bank and dismounted, gray eyes sweeping the short business block. The street was empty except for a black mongrel dozing in the sunshine and three Bar B horses racked in front of the Mercantile. One was Bonnie Turner's little bay, the others belonged to her grandfather, old Pete Burke, and his foreman, Silver Deems.

Dave tied his roan gelding and stepped up on the board walk. He stood there a moment and rolled a smoke, the midday sun hot upon him, stood there long enough to be seen by the townspeople. Then the talk would start. That, he was sure, was another way in which the town had not changed. Everybody from Ira Runyan to Doc Vane would be wondering what Dave Mathers was going to do.

Tossing his cigarette into the street, Dave turned into the bank. Runyan was at his desk. When he saw Dave, he let out a whoop and jumped up, hand extended.

"I've been looking for you, boy. Welcome back to the Tumblebug."

Dave shook Runyan's hand and dropped it. He had never liked the banker, and now he felt ashamed of his feeling, for his father had considered Runyan his best friend.

"Thanks, Ira," Dave said. "I ain't exactly glad to be back under the circumstances."

Runyan's moonlike face sobered. "I feel the same way. John Mathers was my oldest friend. We were the first in the valley, you know. Got here a full year before Pete Burke and Jasper Hallet drove their cattle in and had the big ruckus."

"Your letter was pretty skimpy," Dave said. "Who done it?"

"I don't know," Runyan said, troubled, "but I'll tell you what I do know."

The banker turned to his desk behind the counter and swung a hand toward a chair for Dave. He was grave. He had a way, Dave remembered, of changing his emotion to fit the occasion, and Dave had often suspected that his feelings were as synthetic as the wig of black hair he habitually wore.

Again Dave felt a little ashamed, for he had no sound reason to think that Runyan was putting on.

"Your father was too independent and too honest for his own good," Runyan said, "and Pete Burke don't like independent men. I rode out to the 81 on a Monday morning. That was two weeks ago. Your father was hanging from that big juniper in front of your house."

Dave didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say. He had been breaking horses on the high desert, fifty miles from the ranch he was working for, so he had not received Runyan's letter until two days ago. He had started north at once. Through all the long hours of that lonely ride, he had tried to think, to plan his future, to decide what was to be done, and so far he had arrived at only one conclusion. He'd keep the 81.

"I came back to town for the sheriff," Runyan went on. "That's Bud Hallet, you know. He got the star last fall in spite of all Pete Burke could do. Doc Vane went out with us. Looked to me like there'd been about a dozen men in the outfit that did the hanging. It happened some time during the night, because John had been in town Sunday evening. We brought the body in. Had the funeral two days later

and buried him beside your mother on the ridge back of your house."

Dave said "Thanks," remembering the last time he had seen his father. They had shaken hands and he had stepped into the saddle. For a moment he had sat there, looking down at his father, a tall gaunt man who had been hounded by bad luck from the day he had come to the valley and started the 81. But through bad times or good, John Mathers had never lost his sense of values and he had never grown bitter or discouraged.

It may have been the way the sunlight had fallen across his father's face, but it had seemed to Dave that there was a sort of halo around John Mather's head when he'd said, "There was a time when we made money here. I'll hang and rattle, and maybe we can bring the 81 back."

He'd hung all right, hung like a common thief from a juniper limb, but John Mathers had never stolen anything in his life. It was easy for Dave to blame himself. If he'd stayed, he might have prevented it, but his father had taught him never to blame himself. "Just do the best you can," John Mathers had said many times. "Keep thinking about tomorrow. You can't change nothing by crying over the milk you spilled yesterday."

Runyan had been watching Dave, the clock on a shelf behind him hammering the silence with its dry metallic ticking. Then he asked, "What are your plans, boy?"

"I'm going home," Dave answered.

"I'll give you some advice," the banker said. "I hope you'll take it, because I know what'll happen if you don't. Sell the 81. Then ride a long ways from here and forget what's happened."

"Who'd buy it?"

"I will."

Dave shook his head. "I've got to keep it."

"Look, son." Runyan leaned forward, fat fingers laced in front of him. "I loaned John three thousand dollars last fall. Actually the 81 isn't worth much more than that, but I'll give you two thousand cash. That's enough for you to get started somewhere else."

Dave had not known that his father had gone into debt. The ranch had been clear when Dave had left, and he thought his father would have mentioned it in his letters if he had mortgaged the outfit.

"Before you say no," Runyan pressed, "let me tell you something you don't know. We're standing on the verge of the damndest range war Central Oregon ever saw, and your 81 is right in the middle. That's why John was killed, and you'll get the same if you stay there alone."

Dave looked at him thoughtfully.

"What do you want the 81 for?" he asked.

"I want to help you," Runyan said simply, "but it's a little more than that. Everything I own is here on the Tumblebug. If this thing busts open, I'll lose all I've got. The 81 is the key to the whole situation. It's smack in the middle between the valley and the mountains. Burke can't get at Hallet and Hallet can't get at Burke if the 81 can be held. I aim to hire an army, and I'll hold it just to keep the peace."

Dave rose. "I'm staying, Ira. It's the only thing I can do."

"Let me show you something." Runyan pulled a drawer open and lifted a piece of paper from it. "We found this tacked onto the front door of your house."

Dave studied the crude "V" that had been drawn on the paper by a blunt-pointed pencil. He asked, "What is it?"

"After you left, Jasper Hallet organized the mountain ranchers into what he calls the Starlighters. Burke got the valley boys into an outfit that calls itself the Vigilantes. Names don't mean much, but it does mean that you're caught between them, and I wouldn't put it past either one to treat you like they did John."

Dave motioned to the paper. "You're making out Burke killed Dad?"

"I'm not making out anything. I'm just telling you what me and Doc and Bud found."

For a moment Dave stared at the banker's moon-round face, wondering if he was adding this up right. Dave found it hard to believe that Pete Burke was responsible for his father's death, but Runyan wanted him to think exactly that. Dave had never known what was between Burke and Runyan, but he did know that the banker had hated the Bar B owner for years.

"Pete and Deems are in town, ain't they?" Dave asked.

Runyan nodded. "Been in most of the morning."

"Think I can take both of 'em?"

"I'm sure you can. You've grown up since you left, Dave." The banker motioned to the black-butted .44 holstered low on Dave's right thigh. "You pack that iron like you know how to use it. I seldom council violence, but in this case it's simple justice."

Dave tapped the paper. "This ain't proof, Ira. I reckon they'll wait."

Runyan's face showed disappointment. Then, wiping his round face clean of expression, he said, "Don't wait too long if you want to live."

Dave turned away from the desk and walked toward the door. Then, remembering something, he swung back. "I've been sending some *dinero* home. Know what Dad did with it?"

"No."

"I'm broke now, but I'll pay for the funeral as soon as I can."

"No need for that. I took care of it. It was the least I could do for John."

"I'll pay you some time," Dave said, and left the bank.

Bonnie Turner was waiting on the board walk for him. He was surprised, for his parting with her grandfather had not been pleasant. He lifted his Stetson, saying, "Howdy, Bonnie. You're still as purty as a new red-wheeled buggy."

She smiled and held out her hand. "Still full of blarney, aren't you, Dave?" Her smile faded. "I'm sorry about your father."

He gripped her hand and reluctantly dropped it. "It's rough, all right."

She was silent a moment, dark blue eyes making a quick study of his lanky, tough-muscled body. He had always thought she was the prettiest girl he had ever seen, and now he saw that a year had added to her beauty. Superficially she had not changed. Her hair was the red-gold it had always been, her eyes the same bright blue, her straight nose held as many freckles as it had the last time Dave had seen her.

The change, he decided, was a matter of maturity. He had known her as a girl, a little reckless, almost a flirt. Now she was none of that. She was straight-forward and serious, and it seemed to him he read real concern in her face.

"What have you been doing?" she asked.

"Breaking horses."

She motioned to the gun on his thigh. "With that?"

He realized she was thinking the same about him that he was thinking about her. The year had matured him, too, but in a different way. With her it was a matter of becoming a woman with a woman's desire for peace, but he had become a man with a man's obligation to settle with his father's killer.

"No, but I've learned how to use it," he said.

"I suppose you have, but will using it change anything that's happened?"

"I'll change something."

She shook her head. "What's happened has happened, Dave, but you can keep other things from happening. Don't go home, Dave."

"Why not?"

"We've got trouble, but it was your father's. There's no use getting killed over it."

"You mean that juniper may bear some more fruit?"

She nodded. "I suppose Ira Runyan tried to convince you that Granddad was responsible for your father's death. He wasn't. Believe me, he wasn't."

"You think I'll make a mistake? That it?"

"That's it. Two wrongs don't make a right, do they?"

"Not if both of 'em are wrongs," he said, "but I aim to be sure what I do is right."

He stepped past her and walked around the hitch-pole to his roan. When he rode away, she was still standing there, looking at him, her eyes troubled. It was not until the town was behind him that he remembered he had forgotten to eat dinner in Contention.

CHAPTER II.

THE 81.

DAVE rode up the valley, eyes on the familiar scene before him. Pete Burke's ranch, the Bar B, lay to his left on the other side of the river. Big! That was the word. It applied to Burke literally as well as figuratively, and it applied to his spread. From the road Dave could see the sprawling ranchhouse and huge barns and haystacks and corrals, monuments to a man's greed and ambition and pride.

Now, without conscious direction on his part, Dave's thoughts turned to Bonnie as they had many times during the year he had been gone. He had never understood how a man like Pete Burke could have a granddaughter like Bonnie. She was everything to Dave that a woman should be, and he had loved her, it seemed, for as long as he could remember.

Before he had left the valley, he had ridden over to the Bar B and asked her to marry him. She had not said she didn't love him, but she had said she wouldn't marry a man without her grandfather's approval, so Dave had asked Burke.

As long as Dave lived, he would never forget Pete Burke's words. Burke was a mountain of a man, well into his sixties. but as straight as most men of thirty. Dave remembered how he had drawn his great shoulders back and shoved his rock-like chin forward. Then he'd said, "You ain't marrying Bonnie, and I'll tell you why mighty damned quick. When I cash in, the Bar B goes to Bonnie. She'll marry a man who's big enough to run the outfit."

Burke had left no doubt that he considered Dave a wet-eared kid who would never be big enough to do the job. Still, Dave had asked the question any man would have asked. "How do you know I'm not big enough to run the Bar B?"

Pete Burke had laughed, a contemptuous laugh. "Because I knew your old man. He was here before I was. He had his chance and missed it. Now what's he got? Nothing but a ten-cow spread because he let me push him off the valley grass. He's soft and you're soft. That's why you ain't the man for Bonnie. Now get the hell out of here and stay out. You've been pestering Bonnie too much."

So Dave had ridden off without seeing Bonnie again. Now, thinking about it, he wondered if he had made a mistake. She had a mind of her own and she'd been nineteen, old enough to make her own decisions. If she had loved him in the way he had loved her, she would have married him regardless of what her grandfather wanted, but there had been her future and his own pride to consider. He had nothing, and he had no immediate prospects.

He tried to put her out of his mind now. This was no time to think about love. He had a job to do, a dirty, dangerous job, and there was a chance that Pete Burke was the man he wanted. Burke had tried to buy the 81 and had failed. He disliked anyone who prevented him from getting what he wanted. It was that which had made him dislike the Mathers; it was possible that it had been enough to make him kill.

The road followed the river, the valley slowly narrowing as Dave rode upstream, the rimrock that flanked it frowning down upon the lush green of the flat. Ahead of Dave the Blue Mountains rose to form a pine-clad barrier between the Tumblebug range and the John Day River to the east.

A dozen ranches were scattered between the summit and the Tumblebug, little outfits much like the 81, but there was a difference. The others had no chance to be anything but what they were, but the 81, located at the head of the valley, might some day reach again for the valley grass if the owner had enough courage to challenge the Bar B. That, Dave thought, was the reason Ira Runyan wanted it, and the reason Pete Burke had tried to bulldoze John Mathers into selling.

To the southeast Dave could see the brown top of Bald Butte above the timbered peaks around it. Jasper Hallet had his ranch just above the fringe of pines that petered out two-thirds of the way up the slope. He could sit in a rocking chair on his front porch and look down upon the valley and hate Pete Burke with all the virulence of a bitter old man who sees another man accomplish what he had hoped to. He had fought Burke and he had lost, and had made his ranch on the butte, but he had never accepted the situation as final.

It was late afternoon when Dave rode into the 81. He sat his saddle, eyes swinging from the cabin to the log barn and on around the corrals, then came to the juniper tree in the front of the house. He stared at the big limb from which they had hanged his father, then a red haze moved across his eyes and he found it hard to breathe. John Mathers was the last man in the valley to deserve that kind of death.

There was no measuring of time for Dave then. He sat his saddle, shoulders slumped forward. His father had stood almost directly under that limb the morning Dave had left; he'd stood there when he'd said he would hang and rattle.

Slowly Dave came down off his horse and walked to the juniper. He shook his fist at the tree and swore in a wild rush of fury, his words beating against his ears, strange sounding words that seemed to come from another's throat. Then he stopped, hands fisted at his sides, his fury spent. This was foolish.

He went into the cabin and stood in the middle of the big room, staring at one familiar thing and then another while memories crowded back into his mind—the old range, the pine table that his father had made, the Winchester hanging from the antlers on the wall. He remembered killing the buck and he remembered the great pride that had filled him when his father had said it was the biggest deer he had ever seen killed on the Tumblebug.

The cabin's interior was neat and clean, just as his father had always kept it. It seemed a little strange, for he found it hard to remember that his father had been killed only two weeks before. He went out, moving from chicken house to woodshed and on to the barn. Someone had fed the hens. The Jersey cow in the pasture along the river had been milked that morning.

His father's black saddle horse was in the corral, whinnying as he trotted toward Dave.

Except for his father's absence, the place seemed exactly as it had when he'd left. Then he remembered the spotted hound, Nip, that usually came bounding up when someone turned in from the road. But Nip was missing, and Dave wondered if that had anything to do with his father's death.

Dave couldn't live here by himself. He realized that now, although he had never been dissatisfied before he'd left. It was simply that he lacked the stolid patience which had characterized his father.

He thought how lonely his father must have been while he had been gone, although the letters he had received regularly once a week had never indicated it. They had always been cheerful and filled with high hopes for the future.

The 81 didn't need a big herd, John Mathers had written repeatedly, but it needed a good one, and they'd have it when Dave came back. The money was piling up. He was saving everything that Dave sent, and when he could spare the time, he was working out a little himself. It wouldn't be long now until they were back on their feet and Dave could come home.

Dave didn't know anyone had ridden up until a man shouted, "Dave! Where'n hell did you come from, Dave?"

Startled, he swung away from the corral. It was Stub Cole, a neighbor who had a small spread up the river. Dave said, "I just got in."

Cole swung down and held out his hand, knobby face creased by a long grin. "Good to see you, Stub."

"Where you been?"

"Breaking horses in the high desert. Didn't get Runyan's letter till a couple of days ago."

There was silence a moment, Cole digging a boot toe in the dust. The day was beginning to cool, for the sun was almost down now behind the Cascades to the west. The stillness seemed to press in around them, broken only by the rustle of the river. It moved swiftly here, tumbling down out of the mountains in white fury, then slowed to meander on toward Contention before it dropped between high walls to pound on toward the Deschutes.

"I've been doing the chores here," Cole said. "Runyan promised to get word to you, so I knew you'd be along."

"Thanks," Dave said.

At the moment there seemed nothing else to say. He couldn't have said anything else if he had thought of the right words, for he was not a man to show his emotions, and he knew he would if he tried to talk.

"I tended to my things 'fore I left home," Cole said. "I'll give you a hand and then we'll cook up a bait of grub. Kind of tough, coming back to this."

"Where's Nip?" Dave asked.

Cole gave him a quick, worried look. "Dead. Reckon they shot him the night they got your pa. We found him beside the house. Had a slug through his middle."

There was no talk as they drove the milk cow up. They fed the chickens and gathered the eggs, taking their time, for it seemed like a ritual, the simple things that Dave had done since he was a small boy. Dave took care of the black and his roan while Cole milked.

It was dusk when they went in to the cabin. Cole lighted a lamp and built a fire. The woodbox, Dave saw, was empty. Taking a lantern out to the chip pile, he chopped enough wood for supper and

breakfast. He returned with an armload and stoked up the range. A few minutes later Cole said, "Come and get it."

CHAPTER III.

Sounds in the Night.

Standing at the stove, Dave made himself ask the question he had been putting off. "Who done it?"

Cole looked at him sharply. "Didn't Runyan tell you?"

"He didn't seem to know for sure."

"Oh hell! Everybody knows. Pete Burke and that damned Vigilante bunch. Vigilantes!" Cole swore bitterly. "Neck stretchers, that's all they are. Been brewing for a long time, Dave, but it's in the open now. We've been waiting for you to come back. Now you're here and we'll square it."

"How do you know it was Burke?"

"Know? Why, nobody else would do a thing like that. That's how I know. Burke claims he's having his beef rustled. That's why they've got their Vigilantes. They figure the beefs go right by here to get to the John Day mining camps, so they figured your dad was in on it."

They ate in silence, Dave thinking, about what Cole had said, and feeling the same doubts that had plagued him when he'd heard Runyan's insinuations of Pete Burke's guilt. Burke, for all of his greed and ambition, was not a man to charge anyone with rustling unless there was proof, and there would have been no proof against John Mathers.

Finished, Dave leaned back and rolled a smoke. He asked, "Has there been some rustling?"

"I reckon," Colt admitted. "But I've got a hunch it's Silver Deems hisself who's doing it. He could pull the wool over Pete's eyes plumb easy. Or it might be some of Pete's neighbors." Cole laughed shortly. "That would be a joke, Pete organizing the rustlers into a Vigilance Committee."

Dave said nothing, for Cole would not have wanted to hear what he was thinking. It was more likely that the rustlers were some of the mountain men, ranchers like Stub Cole himself who had hung on for years, barely making a living while Burke had prospered. If a stolen herd could be pushed out of the valley and up the river past the 81, the thieves would have clear sailing on over the mountains. Even the most honest high country rancher would shut his eyes if Bar B beefs were being stolen right in front of him.

Cole got up and began clearing the table. Dave said, "Runyan says Bud Hallet's the sheriff now."

Cole gave Dave a furtive glance and began filling his pipe. "Yeah, Bud's sheriff. Long as old Red Bascom packed the star, Burke was the law. Well, that's changed."

They washed and dried the dishes, silence falling between them again. Cole wouldn't want to hear what Dave was thinking about the sheriff situation, either. Red Bascom had stood close to Burke, but he'd been tough and he'd been honest. On the other hand, Bud Hallet, old Jasper's son, was one of the mountain ranchers. If Dave judged him right, he wouldn't be above having a hand in the rustling himself.

When the dishes had been put away in the same neat manner that John Mathers had always kept them, Cole said, "Better bunk with me tonight. Things are too rough for you to stay here alone."

"I'll take my chances."

"You're as stubborn as John," Cole said sourly. "I tried to get him to leave, but he wouldn't. You don't want the same medicine, do you?"

"Dad trusted people," Dave said. "I don't. If anyone comes poking his snoot around here tonight, I'm likely to shoot first and ask questions second."

For a moment Cole said nothing, pale eyes pinned on Dave's weather-burned face. He was angry, and that puzzled Dave, for nothing had been said to stir the squat man's temper.

"I'm going to give it to you straight," Cole burst out. "Old Jasper Hallet's moving into the valley, and me and every cowman between here and the pass is going with him. Now I want to know if you're for us or against us."

"Neither. Not till I know for sure who killed Dad."

Cole gestured impatiently. "Hell, what kind of proof do you want?"

"More than I've got."

"Say, you used to be sweet on Burke's granddaughter. Is that what's the matter with you."

"Maybe."

Cole scratched a red scar on his cheek, eyes smoldering. "Damn it, Dave, you listen to me. We was all getting along till we had that bad winter. None of us had much hay, but Pete Burke did and he wouldn't sell us any. Not a spear. We just about got wiped out, and for why? Because Burke wanted the mountain range. He wanted it so bad he killed your dad. Now what's wrong with you?"

"I'll tell you, Stub. Dad used to hammer a lot of things into my head. One of 'em was to never go off half-cocked. He wouldn't want me to now."

"To hell with you!" Cole shouted. "We'll get Pete Burke, and we'll get that tough Silver Deems. I'm not asking you again. Are you siding us or not?"

"I don't know yet."

Cole threw up his hands in disgust. "When are you going to know? After Burke and Deems string you up?"

"I don't aim to wait that long."

"You'll play hell deciding anything if you wait till tomorrow night." Cole swung toward the door and tramped across the room, boot heels cracking on the rough plank floor. Then he turned back. "Us Starlighters are having a meeting in Contention tomorrow afternoon right under old Pete's nose. Want to come?"

Dave nodded. "I'll be there."

"And you stay inside tonight. Bar your door and don't poke your nose out. Savvy?"

Dave nodded, saying nothing. Cole went out, slamming the door behind him. Dave stood there a moment until the hoof beats of Cole's horse died, stood there staring at the door. He didn't know who had killed his father, but he had one hunch that was rapidly becoming a conviction. The Starlighters were after Pete Burke's scalp, and they were starting by stealing his beefs.

Cole had told Dave to stay inside, so Dave did just the opposite. He took a blanket off the bunk, blew out the lamp, and left the cabin, shutting the door behind him.

For a little while he stood there staring at the black sweep of the velvet sky. Two weeks ago there would have been a full moon. John Mathers might have seen a bunch of stolen cattle being moved up the river and he might have died because of what he had seen.

Dave circled the cabin and moved up the slope to the fringe of timber fifty yards or more north of the 81 buildings. For a time he sat with his back against a pine trunk, smoking and thinking, and hating the conclusions that logic forced upon him.

He had every reason to hate Pete Burke, for what Cole had said about the bad winter and Burke's refusal to help was true. It was the reason Dave had gone away to work, the reason the 81 needed restocking. Now it was doubtful if he could find fifty head of stock that carried the 81 brand in the hills above the river.

John Mathers had refused to have any part in the scheming that had gone on for years against Burke. So, with the showdown at hand, he might have been killed by either side. The more Dave thought about it, the more the sense of frustration grew in him. His natural sympathies lay with the mountain ranchers, and it galled him to think of siding Pete Burke.

Within an hour from the time Dave had left the cabin, he heard a band of horsemen ride downstream. They moved fast, apparently unconcerned by Dave's presence on the 81, and within a few minutes the sound of their passage died.

Utter weariness brought sleep to Dave in spite of the turbulence of his thoughts. When he woke, he thought he had dreamed of hearing riders again. He turned over, his body demanding more sleep, then he sat upright, aware that this was no dream. Someone was in his cabin. There was a light in the back window, and the rumble of talk came to him.

Dave rose, instantly alert. Drawing his gun, he checked it and slid it back into leather. He moved silently toward the cabin until he reached the chip pile, then angled toward the chicken house to avoid a patch of light that fell almost to the chopping block.

The lamplight died and Dave heard the front door close. Stub Cole's voice came clearly, "I told him to stay inside, but hell, he must have got spooked and made a run for it."

A match flared, its brief light touching Bud Hallet's thin face as he lighted his cigarette. He said, "His horse is in the corral. He must be around somewhere."

"Naw. I tell you he got boogered. I wouldn't want to stay here alone after

what happened. He probably saw John's ghost and lit a shuck out of here."

They moved away from the cabin toward the horses. A moment later there was the squeak of saddle leather as they mounted and rode down-river. Dave remained where he was, trying to fit their visit into this pattern of death, but the proof he wanted was still missing.

Other sounds came from the west, sounds of fast moving cattle and horses and cowboys' voices, and Dave knew he was witnessing a theft of Bar B steers just as his father must have been a witness two weeks ago. It was too dark for him to see them, but he heard the cattle as they streamed by.

With a full moon in a clear sky, a man drawn out of his cabin by the racket would have seen them. John Mathers was the sort who would have gone charging down the road wanting to know what it was all about. He had found out, and he had died because everyone on the Tumblebug knew his silence could not be bought.

Dave went back to his blanket, but he didn't sleep. He smoked one cigarette after another, and when dawn drove the blackness from the sky, he picked up his blanket and returned to the cabin. He was sick, with the kind of soul-deep sickness that comes to a man when he sees what he must do and hates the doing of it with every fiber of his body.

Stub Cole had been a good neighbor, and Dave had liked him. He had respected old Jasper Hallet and Bud. He had felt a sympathy for them just as he had felt a sympathy for every mountain rancher who had been hurt by Pete Burke's overweening power. But from what Dave knew now, he judged that these men were the ones he wanted.

He built a fire and cooked breakfast, his mind filling in the details of his plans. He would be a hypocrite, a traitor, but it was the only way he could play it. He would see Jasper Hallet, he would go to the meeting of the Starlighters, and somehow he would find out who had killed his father.

CHAPTER IV.

Old Loves Never Die.

It was full daylight by the time he had eaten breakfast and finished his chores. Then he walked up the slope to his mother's and father's graves. His mother had died a long time ago, and he did not remember her very well, but he did remember how his father had cared for the grave. He had carved a headboard and built a small fence around the grave. Now he lay there beside her.

Dave stood beside the fence, looking down at both graves, one covered by grass, the other by loose dirt, and he saw that there were flowers on both. They were wilted, and it was a moment before he noticed that they were snapdragons, garden flowers, not wildflowers that Stub Cole's wife might have bought.

There was something strange and puzzling about this. Ira Runyan was not a man who would do it, and none of the mountain rancher's wives had time to fuss with flowers. The struggle for survival was too desperate. What gardens they had would contain carrots and parsnips, not snapdragons.

Dave put the flowers out of his thoughts. A sort of wordless prayer rose from the sick emptiness of his mind, a plea for guidance. He knew what his father would have said. "Lift up your eyes. Don't let hatred corrode your heart. Vengeance is the Lord's, not yours. Whatever you do now must be done to help those who live, not those who are dead."

He was so deep in his thoughts that he did not hear the horse until it was close. When he did he wheeled, startled, right hand dropping to gun-butt. It fell away, for it was Bonnie Turner who had ridden up.

She pulled her horse to a stop, smiling gently. "I brought some flowers, Dave. I didn't tell you yesterday, but after you left the Tumblebug, I learned to—to love your father. He was the finest man I ever knew."

He gave her a hand and she dismounted. What she had said was as puzzling as the presence of the flowers had been a moment before, for when he had left the valley, Bonnie had known John Mathers as a stubborn man who refused to bow to her grandfather.

She stood beside Dave at the fence, looking down at the graves, the smile gone. Her Stetson dangled down her back from the chin cord, the morning sun touching her hair with fire so that it seemed more red than gold.

He said, "Thanks." It struck him then that she had brought the flowers without thought of reward. It had been different with Ira Runyan who wanted to buy the 81; it had been different with Stub Cole who wanted Dave's gun to strengthen the Starlighters.

"Let's go inside," Bonnie said. "I want to be there when Granddad gets here, and we don't have much time."

"What's he coming for?" Dave demanded.

"To bulldoze you like he does everybody else," she said. "He wants to buy the 81."

"He can save his wind," Dave said angrily.

She smiled. "John Mathers' son has a lot of John Mathers in him, but he's not as wise as his father was. He's likely to blow up at the wrong time."

They turned toward the cabin, Bonnie leading her horse, Dave wishing she was anywhere but here. He asked, "Pete coming alone?"

"Silver Deems will be along. So will Alf Kyner. You don't know Alf, but he's ornery. He rode in a couple of months ago and Granddad hired him for his gun."

Dave had heard of Alf Kyner. He wasn't over twenty, but already he had made a name for himself and his gun. It struck Dave that it was queer Kyner would be here drawing Bar B pay, for old Pete had never been a man to hire gunslingers. Certain of himself and his position, he had never needed to.

"I don't savvy," Dave said. "Why is Kyner on the Bar B pay-roll?"

"Because Granddad is scared," she said frankly. "He won't admit it, but I know it's true. All of a sudden he seemed to realize he was old."

"Funny," Dave said. "Yesterday when I rode into Contention I thought that the town hadn't changed, but now it seems like everything's changed."

"Everything but the town. Contention!" She laughed shortly. "What a wonderful name for our town. Your father told me he wanted to name it Harmony, but Ira insisted on Contention because of the fight between Granddad and Jasper Hallet."

"Still a good name. What kicked the fight into the open again?"

"Red Bascom's death. You knew he was drygulched?"

"No."

She nodded. "From the rimrock. Nobody knows who did it, but Bud Hallet got the sheriff's job. Right away old Jasper began making threats. He organized the Starlighters and we started losing cattle."

She left her horse ground-archored behind the cabin and walked with Dave to the front. Pausing, she stared down valley, her hands thrust into the pockets of her leather jacket. Dave, standing behind her, looked at the back of her head and neck, the trim set of her shoulders, and he thought again that it was a strange freak of nature that had made her kin to a man like Pete Burke.

"How did you happen to get acquainted with Dad?" Dave asked.

"I rode up here to see him after you left. Then I just kept coming. I liked to talk to him. It was different talk than I heard at home."

That, Dave knew, would be true, for Pete Burke's thoughts never went beyond the needs and problems of the Bar B. John Mathers had been as different from Burke as two could be. A school-teacher before he came to the Tumblebug, he had read a great deal and he liked to talk about what he had read.

"What did Pete think about you coming here?"

"He told me to stop it, but I kept coming." She turned to face him, frowning a little. "Dave, why didn't you come back to see me that time after you'd talked to Granddad?"

"Pete made it plumb plain how I stood."

"But I was the one you wanted to marry, not Pete Burke."

"And you said you wouldn't marry anyone who didn't satisfy Pete."

"Did I say that?"

He nodded. "It ain't a thing I'd forget. When I showed up at the Bar B, I didn't expect to ask Pete, because I knew how I stood with him."

"I guess I've changed more than I realize," she said thoughtfully. "I'll never forget how I felt when I saw you leave, not even looking back at the house. I was afraid I'd never see you again."

She was, he knew, trying to tell him a great deal more than she had actually put into words, and he knew, too, that he had never stopped loving her, that his pride was less important than he had thought the day Pete Burke had curried him down.

He took a step toward her, wanting to take her into his arms and tell her that he loved her, but he saw that it was not the time. She had stiffened, her lips tightening.

She said, "They're coming," and stepped past him into the cabin.

Dave saw them, Pete Burke in the middle, Silver Deems on the side, and the skinny kid, Alf Kyner, on the other. Dave stepped to the door and lounged there as he rolled a smoke.

He said to Bonnie, "This ain't no place for you if there's going to be trouble."

"I'm staying," she said sharply. "I can't change Granddad, but maybe I can keep him from doing something he'll be ashamed of later."

"This won't be a hanging," Dave said. "If his boys want to swap smoke, we'll swap it."

She put a hand on his arm, her eyes searching his stone-hard face. "Dave, I know this doesn't make sense, but I love Granddad and I hate him. It's been that way ever since you left the valley."

He gave her a thin grin, the cold cigarette dangling from one corner of his mouth. "You love him because he's your only kin, but you hate him because of what he does. That right?"

"That's it." She dropped her hand and moved away from him, her face filled with misery. "Don't take your eyes off Kyner. He's the kind who thinks he's a man because he's filed some notches on his gun."

"I'll watch him," Dave said, and stepped into the sharp glare of the morning sun.

Dave waited under the juniper tree. He had lighted his cigarette, the smoke drifting upward into the still air. The Bar B men had swung off the road. Now they came directly toward him, Burke's face as hard as the rocky rims that frowned upon the valley. He was not as big as Dave remembered him, and his face seemed thinner and more deeply lined than it had been a year ago. For all the arrogant dignity that he still wore, it seemed to Dave that he was only the shell of the man who had made the Bar B what it was.

"Howdy." Dave flipped his cigarette into the grass and dropped his hands to his sides. "Coming back to look the juniper over, Pete?"

"Take it easy, kid," Silver Deems said sharply. "If you cut yourself a piece of trouble, you're likely to get a bigger slice than you're figuring on."

Dave pinned his eyes on the Bar B ramrod. Deems had cuffed back his expensive pearl-colored Stetson, and a lock of silver-blond hair made a pale streak against his forehead. He was a slender, rock-jawed man in his late twenties who possessed the same overbearing quality that had always marked Pete Burke, but the difference between the two seemed greater to Dave than it had been a year ago. Deems was young and filled with the assurance of youth; Burke had come to the place where age had weakened him with its doubts.

"If there's trouble, you'll slice it," Dave said, and swung his gaze to Alf Kyner. "You've gone downhill, Pete, or you wouldn't be dragging that thing around with you all the time."

Kyner's face turned a dull red. He was probably not over twenty, with a flat nose that had been broken under some man's fist, and a short upper lip that covered only half of his out-slanting teeth. He was as ugly and repulsive as a coiled rattlesnake, and fully as dangerous.

"I ain't taking no lip off you!" Kyner cried. "Pete says we ain't to burn no powder, but that don't hold the next time I meet up with you."

"He can talk." Dave gave Burke a tight grin. "When I took a look at his face, I didn't think he was human."

CHAPTER V.

Bar B's Visit.

Kyner let out an incoherent squall and grabbed for his gun. Burke swore at him, right hand sweeping out and slapping the young fellow's face. "None of that, you hear?"

Kyner subsided, glowering at Dave, his temper still honed to a fine edge.

Burke said, "I'm here on business, Mathers. I want to buy your outfit, lock, stock and barrel."

"You tried to buy it when Dad was alive," Dave said, "and the answer was no. It still is."

"I expected that." Burke leaned forward. "Now listen, son. You hang tight and I'll bust you. I don't want to do that, so I'm making you a fair proposition. I'll give you five thousand dollars for the 81. You

and me both know it ain't worth that. Not to anybody but me."

"It is to me."

Burke swept Dave's words aside with a motion of his big hand.

"Mathers, I may have been wrong about you. A year ago you wouldn't have stood there and talked like you just done to Silver and Kyner, but you ain't growed up to be as big as you think you are. The Bar B's run this country for years. It still does. Don't you think otherwise."

Dave shook his head. "There's a hell of a lot that's happened lately I don't savvy, but one thing's clear. You're done."

"You're saying it don't make it so!" Burke shouted, angry now. "I've been losing cattle and they go through here." He stopped, scowling, then added, "I never believed your dad was hooked up with the rustlers, but maybe you are. That the reason you don't want to sell?"

"No it ain't, but I'm wondering if you wanted the 81 so bad you killed Dad, figuring you could make me sell."

"We don't have to listen to this, Pete," Deems said. "There's one way to change his mind."

Burke shook his head. "I'll give him twenty-four hours. Think it over, Mathers."

"I've finished my thinking," Dave said. "Twenty-four won't change it."

"Only one way to change his mind," Deems insisted. "You played along with his old man. Hell, he was just a psalm-singing old fool, of a crook—"

Dave forgot what Bonnie had said about watching young Kyner. He lunged forward, caught Deems by an arm and tumbled him out of his saddle. The blond man must have been surprised, for he came easily, or he may have expected it, confident of his ability to beat Dave down. In either case, he rolled over and jumped up. Then Dave moved in.

From the moment Dave had read Ira Runyan's letter telling of his father's death, he had lived under the strain of deep emotion. He had felt the great weight of grief; he had hated men whose identity he did not know. Now he drove at Deems, finding release from the tension that gripped him.

He rocked the Bar B man's head with a hammering right, cracked him in the the stomach with a left. He let Deems hit him so that he could get in close, got his arms around the man, and threw him against the trunk of the juniper tree.

He heard Bonnie cry, "Don't do it, Kyner!" He heard Burke shout, "Bonnie!" Dave didn't look around. Deems came to his feet and rushed at him. He met the rush, both fists swinging.

It wasn't a smart fight if judged by scientific standards, but it was a bloody, wicked one. Dave tasted the blood and sweat that rolled down his face, but at the time he didn't feel Deems' blows. He battered the man's nose and saw blood spurt; he took a punch on the side of the face that made the world spin. Before his head cleared, Deems landed a right that knocked him down.

Dave rolled away from a swinging boot, came to his feet and grappled with Deems until his vision cleared, hanging on and smothering the other's blows. Deems brought a knee up and Dave caught it on his thigh. He broke free, ducked a wild uppercut that would have knocked him cold if it had landed and Deems, off-balance then, gave him his opening. Dave caught him squarely on the point of the chin, a blow that rattled his teeth and brought another gush of blood from a cut lip.

Deems' knees gave. He fell against Dave, trying to hold himself upright by clinging to Dave. He had lost his hat, and Dave, grabbing a handful of hair, yanked his head back and hit him again. Dave stepped away, and Deems, unsupported, toppled forward and lay still.

Dave sleeved blood from his battered face. He saw Bonnie standing in front of his cabin, holding his father's Winchester on Kyner, her face bright with triumph. She cried, "Maybe you'll see now, Granddad! You'll see you can't ride down every man who gets in front of you."

"It ain't finished," Kyner called. "I'll kill you, Mathers! I'll kill you!"

Without a word Burke swung down from his horse and motioned for Kyner to help him. Together they lifted Deems into the saddle. Conscious now, he sat there, bending forward and gripping the saddlehorn, a dribble of blood rolling down his chin from his cut lip.

Wearily Burke signaled for Kyner to lead Deems' horse. Then he straightened and wiped a hand across his face as if trying to make sure he was awake. He

looked at Bonnie, and again it seemed to Dave that he was only a shell of the man who had built the Bar B into an empire.

"I will stand for anything from you, Bonnie, except turning against your own outfit," Burke said hoarsely. "Why are you here?"

Kyner was riding away, leading Deems' horse. She said, "To warn Dave about Kyner. You know as well as I do that Silver wanted this fight so Kyner could kill Dave."

Burke stepped into his saddle. He said tonelessly, "We've got to do what we've got to do. I won't see the Bar B destroyed by thieves. Now you come back with me, or don't even come back."

"Then I'll never come back!" she flung at him. "I've argued with you and I've begged you and I've cried over you. I can't stand any more."

"All right," he said. "All right. You were crazy over John Mathers and you're crazy over his kid. Now see what it gets you." He looked at Dave, hating him with all the soul-deep passion that was in him. "I'll run your bunch out of the mountains. You'll leave with nothing."

Burke reined his horse around and rode away.

Dave said, "I doubt that Pete ever loved anything but you and the Bar B. Now he's lost you."

"And if he keeps on, he'll lose the Bar B." She took his arm. "Come inside, Dave. I'll see what I can do for your face."

He went with her, knowing he had been hurt more than he had realized at the time. He was silent while she found some clean cloth and turpentine. He gritted his teeth against the sting, his eyes on her face, and he saw that this break with her grandfather was harder on her than she would admit.

When she was done with him, he asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I'll find a place in town to stay."

He wanted to say that this was the place for her to stay, that he loved her and wanted to marry her. But he didn't. Once he had been held back by his pride and the notion that it would be unfair to ask her to leave the Bar B to marry a man who had nothing. Now he was held back by the knowledge that his own life swung on a thin thread, that he could not marry Bonnie until this trouble was settled.

"I'll ride along," Dave said. "Stub Cole said the Starlighters were meeting today in Contention. He wants me to be there."

She was putting things away. Now she swung to face him, her blue eyes shadowed by sudden fear. "Don't go, Dave."

"Why?"

"You'll be safer here."

"That's funny. Yesterday you said for me not to come out here."

"Well, I—I—Dave, I don't understand this much better than you do. It's like a puzzle with a thousand pieces and I don't have all the pieces, but I have enough to feel sure that somebody's responsible for the things that have happened. Like Red Bascom being dry-gulched and Bud Hallet getting the sheriff's star, and your father's death."

"We've got some likely candidates," he said.

"Granddad and Jasper Hallet, but I don't think it's either one. Jasper has hated Granddad for years, honestly, I think, and maybe he's justified after what's happened, but he's sat up there on Bald Butte all this time, satisfied to just hate. I don't think anything would change him so he'd do all this."

"What's this got to do with me staying here?"

"Granddad heard the Starlighters were meeting so he's taking the Vigilantes to town this afternoon."

"Well, I've got a hunch I'll find out what I want to know before sundown." He turned toward the door, calling back, "I'll saddle up."

"Dave, I don't want—" She stopped, then said in a low bitter tone, "All right. Maybe it can be settled today. It has to be, some time."

Later, riding toward Contention, Dave said, "Strikes me as being mighty queer how the rustlers can nab a bunch of Bar B beefs as easy as they're doing. Some went by last night."

"I'm not surprised." She took a long breath. "Dave, I haven't said anything about this to Granddad because he'd blow up, but I don't trust Silver Deems. He could fix it for Jasper Hallet and his bunch."

"Stub Cole said almost the same thing, and that's queer because I'm sure Stub's into it."

"Maybe it isn't so queer," she said

thoughtfully. "Your dad used to say that honesty was a different thing to different men. Cole might have a hand in stealing our beefs just to get at Granddad, and to do that, he might be willing to take Deems' help, but all the time he'd be hating Deems. He'd say to himself he was stealing to accomplish something else, but he'd think of Deems as a crook because he was double crossing the Bar B."

He considered that, seeing how it could be that way. The contempt that Stub Cole would feel for a man who was a traitor to his own spread might make him want to see Deems killed, regardless of the help the Starlighters were getting from the blond man. Perhaps Stub had purposely pointed Dave's suspicions to Deems, hoping that Dave would do the job.

"I don't know," Dave said finally. "The string's pretty well tangled. Might be Stub wanted to make me think Deems killed Dad so I wouldn't suspicion *him*."

She shook her head. "Stub liked your father, and I believe the mountain men are honest. If they are stealing our cattle, it's a case of the end justifying the means."

Bonnie was silent for a time, her eyes staring unseeingly across the valley at the snow-capped skyline of the Cascades far to the west. Then she said slowly, "Don't let anything I say cause you to make a mistake, but I'm convinced that the man you want is Ira Runyan."

"The hell!" He looked at her sharply. "I'm sorry. I mean—"

"It is hell," she said. "Ira Runyan claims to stand for everything that's decent in this valley. I suppose he even talked about helping you out."

"Yeah. Wanted to buy the 81, so I could go away. Said he had some notes of Dad's."

"He's lying. Your father didn't owe anything to anybody, and he had five hundred dollars deposited in Runyan's bank. He'd saved most of that from what you'd sent him. And Runyan probably showed you a piece of paper with a 'V' on it."

Dave nodded. "Claimed he found it on the 81 door."

"The story is all over the valley. He's lying about that, too." She stared straight ahead, her face filled with misery. "I rode over there early that morning and I saw your father. It's been a nightmare to me ever since. I couldn't sleep for a week." She brought her eyes to him. "There was no paper on the door when I was there. I can read sign as well as any man, and I'll swear that there were only two or maybe three who did it."

"Why, that lying son! He says there were a dozen."

"That story's all over the valley, too."

"Let's move along," Dave said tonelessly. "Iv'e got a job to do, and not much time."

CHAPTER VI.

A Killer and a Thief.

When Dave and Bonnie rode into Contention and left their horses in the livery stable, it was well after noon. The hostler gave Dave a worried look, saying, "It's all over town that we're going to get shot up today."

"Maybe a miracle will come along," Dave said. "That's what it'll take to stop it."

"I ain't one to count on miracles," the man said sourly. "Damn 'em, why can't they do their fighting somewheres else?"

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"Why don't you make 'em do their fighting somewheres else?"

"How?"

"Give every man in town a gun. Meet the Vigilantes and the Starlighters at the end of Main Street. Make 'em shuck their irons or stay out."

"That's Bud Hallet's job," the hostler muttered. "Let 'em kill each other. We'll stay under cover."

Dave walked down the runway to where Bonnie was waiting on the walk. The townspeople would deserve what they got, he thought, and knew at once he was wrong. If it came to a fight, innocent people would be killed. It had to be stopped, but it would take a miracle to do the job.

"You go to where you're going," he told Bonnie.

"I will not." She glared at him as if he had insulted her. "This is my fight as much as anyone's."

A small grin touched the corners of his mouth. Her lips were pressed stubbornly together; her chin was lifted defiantly as if she dared him to make her do something she didn't want to do. There was a good deal of old Pete in her, he thought. She lacked the self-centered ambition that so completely characterized her grandfather, but she had his hard core of courage.

"All right." he said. "I want to see Hallet and Doc Vane, and I can do the job better alone. But it might be a good idea if you're there when I beat the truth out of Runyan."

"I'll meet you in front of the bank in ten minutes," she said.

He glanced at his watch. "Ten minutes," he said, and turned towards the sheriff's office.

Bud Hallet was in, a thin-faced, worried man who was pacing around his desk like a nervous cat. He stopped when Dave came through the door, dark eyes hostile. He said, "Howdy, Mathers. Heard you was back."

Hallet made no move to shake hands. He seemed coolly aloof as if waiting for Dave to make his errand known and get out. Dave said, "Kind of a surprise, finding one of Jasper's boys toting the star."

"Shouldn't be," Hallet said. "It was time somebody besides a Burke man was in this office."

Dave rolled a smoke, head tipped a little, eyes on Hallet while time ribboned out. Then he said, "Ira says you and Doc Vane went with him to bring my father's body in."

"That's right. If you're back here to raise hell about it, get one thing straight. I'm the law. Don't try taking my job."

"You haven't arrested anybody for Dad's killing."

"I will."

"Who?"

Hallet's eyes dropped. He muttered, "I ain't sure."

"I aim to make sure. Ira showed me a piece of paper with a 'V' on it. Did you see it on the door at the 81?"

"No. Ira showed it to us. Said he'd found it on the door." Suspicion clouded Hallet's face. "What the hell are you getting at?"

"I'm just curious." Dave scratched a match to life and held the flame to his cigarette. "Stub asked me to come to the Starlighters' meeting. Where's it going to be?"

"In the lodge hall over the Mercantile." Hallet chewed his lower lip a moment. "I ain't sure you'll be welcome unless we know how you stand."

"You ought to know. You going to stop this fight?"

Hallet laughed shortly. "Hell, I ain't no Texas Ranger."

"Maybe I am," Dave said, and left the sheriff's office.

Doc Vane's office was across the street from the Mercantile. Dave shook hands with him, seeing that Vane was genuinely glad to see him. The medico was an old man who had lived on the Tumblebug nearly as long as Pete Burke and Jasper Hallet had. He had brought the young Hallets and Bonnie Turner into the world, and he had been at the bedsides of Jasper's wife and Bonnie's mother when they had died. He was the one man in the valley who held the respect of both groups, and he would be believed if anyone would.

"Glad to see you, Dave," Vane said, "but you got back at a sorry time. Hell's going to break loose in less'n an hour."

"Maybe we can hold the lid on, Doc," Dave said. "I want the men who killed Dad. Got any ideas?"

The medico shook his head. "I've got a hunch. That's all, just a hunch."

"Might be I've got the same hunch."

Dave cuffed back his hat. "Doc, Ira showed me that paper with the 'V' on it. Did you see him take it off the door?"

"No. He fetched it to me and Hallet and told us where he'd found it." The medico scratched an ear, frowning. "Dave, I've often wondered about the hand of the Almighty when it comes to things like this. Did you know Ira has a bad heart?"

"No, but if it ain't bad now, it's going to be in about five minutes. If you hear a holler, grab your bag and head for the bank."

He swung out of the door, leaving the medico staring thoughtfully after him. Bonnie was waiting, and when he came up to her, she asked. "Find out anything?"

"All I needed to." He glanced inside the bank. Runyan was there alone. Dave brought his gaze back to Bonnie, hesitating. "This is going to be rough. Sure you want to see it?"

"I don't want to see it," she answered, "but I think I'd better be there."

He swung into the bank, Bonnie following. Runyan looked up and smiled affably. Ignoring Bonnie, he said, "Howdy, Dave. Didn't expect you back in town so soon."

Dave gave no greeting. He kicked the gate open at the end of the counter and went through it, Bonnie a step behind. The smile slid off Runyan's lips. He half rose from his chair and dropped back, moonlike face pinched by fear.

"Did Dad have any *dinero* deposited here?" Dave asked.

"Not a cent."

"I mailed some money home every month. Where is it?"

"I don't have the slightest idea."

"Where are those notes you claim he signed?"

Runyan scratched his cheek, uneasy eyes flicking to Bonnie as if wondering why she was there. He rose, saying, "I'll get them," and turned to the safe in the back of the room. He came back with five notes and spread them on the desk. "John borrowed money on these dates." Runyan motioned toward the notes. "It adds up to three thousand dollars. I gave it to him in cash, but I haven't any idea what he wanted with the money or what he did with it."

Dave studied his father's signatures. They looked real, so real they would have fooled anyone but him, and he doubted that he could prove it in court. He laid them down.

"They're fakes, Ira."

Runyan bristled. "Look here, boy. I saw John sign these notes."

"You saw them signed, but you didn't see him sign them." Dave leaned forward so that his face was close to the banker's. "Ira, you're a liar and a thief and a double-crossing killer."

Runyan dropped into his chair.

"I—I—Dave, after all I've done for you and your father. I find it hard to believe I'm hearing right."

"You're hearing fine. You faked that paper with the 'V' to make folks think Burke's bunch did it, but neither Doc nor Bud Hallet saw you take it off that door, and it wasn't there that morning before you three got there."

"I swear it was," Runyan screamed.

"No, it wasn't," Bonnie said. "I was there before you were."

"You calling Bonnie liar?" Dave demanded.

"I ain't calling nobody a liar," Runyan said sullenly. "I saw what I saw."

"She's calling you a liar," Dave said. "She knew Dad's business better than I did. She says he didn't borrow any money from you, that he had five hundred dollars in the bank, and that there were only two or three who killed Dad, not a dozen like you claimed."

"I told you the truth, Dave boy," Runyan said in a wheedling tone. "So help me, John was my best friend."

"No more lies, Ira." Dave moved around the desk. "Tell the truth, or I'll beat the hell out of you."

The fat man jerked a desk drawer open and pulled out a gun, but he was far too slow. Dave grabbed him by the coat collar, yanked him to his feet and hit him. Runyan spilled sideward, his wig coming off, bald head shiny in a ray of sunlight falling through a window. He lay on the floor, staring balefully at Dave, a ridiculous-looking man without the dignity that his wig gave him.

"Dave," Runyan breathed, "I'll kill you! I'm too big to be kicked around like this. Those notes will stand up in court. I aim to call them in, and when I do, you'll lose everything you've got."

Dave laughed in his face. "Ira, I'll tell you something. You won't live long enough to take them notes to court." He drew his gun and thumbed back the hammer. "Don't

figure on Bud Hallet pulling you out of this. He's got more trouble now than he can handle."

"Don't," Runyan screamed. He sat up, the corners of his mouth working. "Bonnie, you wouldn't let him! You—" He put a hand to his chest, his face contorted in a spasm of pain. "My heart! I'm—I'm a sick man."

"It's a question of time, ain't it, Ira?" Dave asked tonelessly. "You're going to die of heart failure or lead poisoning quick unless you tell me what I want to know."

For a moment there was silence, heavy oppressive silence broken only by the steady ticking of the clock. Runyan crawled to the desk and pulled himself upright. "Bonnie, you won't just stand there and let him kill me, will you?"

"If you were any other man, even Jasper Hallet, I'd stop him," Bonnie said, "but not you. Not after the things I know you've done in your sneaking way."

He wiped a hand across his round face, then reached for the notes and tore them up. "All right, Dave. Your father had five hundred dollars in the bank. I'll get it for you." He walked back to his safe, lurching like a man who has almost lost control of his legs, and returned with a roll of bills. He threw them on the desk. "Get out now."

Dave picked up the bills and shoved them into his pocket. "Not yet. Why do you want the 81?"

"To bust Pete Burke!" Runyan cried. "I've hated him from the day I wanted to marry Bonnie's mother and he kicked me out of the house. Kicked me. You hear? I wasn't good enough for her, but a cowhand named Turner was. Burke never deposited his money here. Did his banking in The Dallas. I—I—" He put his hand to his chest again, teeth pressed against the agony that gripped him. He whispered, "I'm sick. Call Vane."

"Not yet," Dave said. "To get at Pete, you had Red Bascom drygulched. You worked it so Bud Hallet got the star, and you talked Jasper and his bunch into stealing Bar B cattle, telling 'em it would be safe now that Bud was sheriff. That right?"

"That's right." Runyan was bending forward, both hands gripping the edge of the desk. "But I didn't have nothing to do with killing John. They did it because John saw who it was."

"Who?"

"It was—it was—" His fingers relaxed their grip on the desk and he fell away from it, head twisted grotesquely on his shoulders, mouth gaping open.

Bonnie screamed, "He's dead!"

Dave knelt beside him, and lifting a hand, felt of his wrist. "Not yet. Get Vane."

"Dave, they're here! Hallet's bunch. They just rode in."

"Get Vane," Dave said again. "Let me know the minute Runyan tells who killed Dad."

"But maybe he won't."

"He's got to. Get Vane, I tell you!" Wheeling, Dave ran out of the bank.

CHAPTER VII.

Dead Man's Finger.

The Starlighters had dismounted and racked their horses. As Dave ran to them, they were moving toward the stairs that led to the lodge hall over the Mercantile, somber faces showing that they realized what lay before them.

Dave called, "Jasper!"

Stub Cole said. "It's young Mathers. Looks like he wants to swap some talk."

Jasper Hallet stopped at the foot of the stairs, a tall straight-backed man with a flowing white beard that gave him the appearance of an ancient patriarch. In a way he was exactly that. Of the fifteen men in his bunch, there were three sons, two sons-in-law, and four grandsons.

Bud Hallet said, "Let's hear what he's got to say, Pa. He thinks he can hold the lid on."

Jasper nodded and stood motionless. When Dave came up, Cole asked, "Find out which side you're on?"

"Yeah, I found out," Dave answered. "Now I've got a question. What were you and Bud doing in my cabin last night?"

Surprised, Cole said, "We didn't think you were around."

Cole threw a glance at Bud Hallet. Then he said, "To keep you from getting what your dad got."

"Stub, you've got the wrong notion. When there's a bad weed in your garden, you've got to pull it out, but hell, all you're doing is just hoeing around it." Dave turned to Jasper. "The weed we've got to

pull is Ira Runyan, Jasper. He's the one who's made all this trouble."

Jasper shook his head. "No, it's Burke. Are you fighting with us, or getting out of the country?"

"Neither. There's one thing you've overlooked. Pete's just about finished."

"He won't be finished till he's dead," Jasper said doggedly.

"By that time half of your boys will be dead. Then who's going to pay off your notes to Ira Runyan? He's the one who'll make something on this fight, not you or Pete."

"I won't lose half of my boys," Jasper said with cool certainty.

"You mean Silver Deems and Alf Kyner won't stick with Pete. That right?"

"It's what I expect," Jasper admitted.

"You can't count on hombres like that. You want Pete's nose shoved into the dirt, don't you? You want him to see that all he's done ain't worth a damn, don't you?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Now hold on, Jasper. Remember Dad and me have been pushed around by Pete the same as you, but what you don't know is that Pete is living in hell and he will the rest of his life."

"Hogwash," one of the Hallet grandsons shouted. "He's—"

Jasper gave the boy a back-handed slap. "Shut up, Bucky. Go on, keep talking Dave."

"Ira Runyan's hated Pete about as long as you have, but he ain't man enough to burn him down, so he works up this ruckus. He's fixed it so you could steal Bar B beefs, telling you it's the way to bust Pete, but stealing beefs kind of goes against your grain, don't it?"

Jasper scowled, a hand coming up to stroke his beard. "That's right. We've got three hundred head of Bar B steers on the other side of Bald Butte, but we ain't sold 'em like Runyan figures. Now if Bonnie was running the Bar B, we could deal with her and I'd return them steers."

"Suppose Pete agrees to swap valley grass in the winter for mountain range in the summer?"

Jasper laughed contemptuously. "You're out of your head, boy. That's the last thing he'll do."

"I think you're wrong. Do one thing for me, Jasper. When Pete hits town, let me handle him. If they burn me down, well, it'll be time to turn your boys loose."

"You won't stop 'em by getting yourself beefed," Bud Hallet said. "You're loco."

"Sounds like it," Jasper said thoughtfully. "We've got ourselves out on a limb, Dave. We aim to climb down by finishing Pete."

"Jasper, what's the most important thing you've got?"

"That's a hell of a question," Jasper said, scowling.

"Answer it."

"My family." Jasper motioned toward his boys. "They're the best—"

"Sure they are. Now use your noggin, Jasper. You're better off than Pete ever was. All the valley grass and the Bar B cattle didn't give him any sons."

"Why, that's true," Jasper said. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Pete ain't even got Bonnie," Dave said. "She's quit him. That's why I say he's licked."

"She wouldn't do that," Jasper said. "She's his only kin."

"She's done it all right, and you'll find out if you let me run this show. Take your boys upstairs, Jasper. All but Bud. Put 'em back of the windows so they can be seen from the street, but keep 'em out of it if the shooting's between me and Deems. Will you do that?"

Jasper stroked his beard, deep-set eyes thoughtful. "You know, Dave, if what you say about Bonnie is true, I'd like to see Pete living another fifty years."

"You'll see it if you play it my way." Dave swung to face Bud. "Will you arrest the men who killed my father if I get the proof you want?"

"Sure, but I—"

"If Ira Runyan ain't dead, you'll get it."

Stub Cole called, "They're coming, Jasper!"

"All right," Jasper said. "We'll try it your way, Dave. Go ahead. We owe John Mathers that much."

Jasper swung around and stamped up the stairs, the others following. Dave said, "Get under cover, Bud."

Bud Hallet nodded. "I'll be in my office," he said, and moved away.

There was no sign of life in the bank. Dave checked his gun and stepped away from the front of the Mercantile so that he would be clear of the horses. Burke's

outfit was riding in now, Burke in front, Deems on one side of him, Kyner on the other.

Dave stood alone at the edge of the street, a lanky figure, gray eyes as hard as the barrel of the .44 that rode easily in the holster on his hip. He stood motionless while Burke and his men dismounted in front of the Ranger Saloon and tied.

Most of them were Bar B hands, the rest were small ranchers who had little of steers. He turned his beady eyes on outfits in the poorer graze at the west end of the valley. Their hearts, Dave guessed, would not be in this. With them it had been a choice of siding Burke or going against him, and they had taken what seemed the lesser of two evils.

No one in Burke's bunch seemed to be aware of Dave's presence. They turned toward the Ranger Saloon, Dave guessing their intentions. They'd liquor up, and when the Starlighters came down the narrow stairway from the lodge hall, Burke's outfit would start burning powder. Worry was in Dave as he threw a glance toward the bank. This had to be timed right. He was depending on Bonnie and Doc Vane for that, but there was no sign of them.

"Pete!" Dave called, and walked slowly toward Burke.

The Bar B owner made a ponderous turn, motioning for Deems and Kyner to stop. Some of the men had gone on through the batwings. The rest paused. Deems said something and young Kyner guffawed.

"You doing old Jasper's fighting for him?" Burke bawled.

"I'm doing my own," Dave said. "When I left here, Pete, you were riding high and handsome, but things are different now. You know you're licked, or you wouldn't have hired a killing son like Kyner."

Burke reared back, making a show of his old arrogance. "Well, I ain't licked so much I'll stand for my cattle being stolen by a bunch of damn hill-billy rustlers."

"I'll tell you something you're so old and blind you can't see for yourself. The rest of you boys stay out of this. The Starlighters have got their sights notched on you. If anybody but Deems pulls his iron, he'll get burned down."

Instinctively their eyes lifted to the windows of the lodge hall. Dave, watching them, sensed that they saw Jasper Hallet and his men.

"Got it all set up, haven't you?" Burke shouted. "Well, it shows you ain't smart because you'll get the first slug."

"I said I'd tell you something, Pete. I've got a hunch that, unbeknownst to you, Deems and Kyner killed my father."

"Then go ahead and settle up with 'em," Burke said. "It ain't no concern of mine."

"But it is your concern that Deems and Kyner have been working with the Starlighters to steal your cattle."

"You're a damned liar!" Burke bawled.

"Step away, Pete," Deems said.

"Hold on there!" Doc Vane yelled from the bank. He came running along the boardwalk, Bonnie a step behind him. She passed him, crying, "Granddad! Granddad! Runyan just told us about Deems and Kyner."

Burke swung toward the girl, bellowing, "Get out! Get out!"

But she came on, and Doc Vane, falling behind and panting with his effort, called, "Runyan's dead. Bad heart. Said Deems and Kyner killed John Mathers."

"There's your proof, Bud!" Dave shouted. "You hear, Bud?"

Hallet stepped out of his office. "I heard, Dave. You're under arrest, Deems. You, too, Kyner."

Deems, certain of his gun speed, faced Dave and made his draw. Two shots hammered out together, and before the echoes of those shots had died, Kyner's gun was in action. Deems took a lurching step forward, then crumpled into the dust of the street.

Kyner's bullet hit Dave high in the chest with the impact of a great club swung by an invisible giant. Jolted by the force of it, he tried to keep his feet, to hold to his gun. Kyner was throwing down for a second shot, but it was a shot he never made. Bud Hallet drove a bullet through his head.

Dave, still trying to hang to consciousness, saw Kyner do down. He saw Bonnie struggling with her grandfather, doggedly clinging to his right arm. Then his knees gave and the sunlight was blotted out. . . .

There is always a tomorrow for those who live, a tomorrow that beckons with its hope of better times, of happiness, of old troubles that are settled and forgotten.

[*Continued on page* 61

A MAN CAN BE WRONG

By DE WITT NEWBURY

Sometimes it takes a snake to beat a snake!

TOM KEHOE believed in luck, as all gold-seekers do. He had noticed something queer about it, too—or thought he had—in his thirty years of rough-and-tumble life.

If you had one bit of good luck, that would be all for a while. But if tough luck hit you, then mighty soon more would come, and more after that. Always three bad licks before it was over.

Finding his mine, now, had been the right kind. It was nothing wonderful, just a hillside burrow following a vein in old rotten quartz. Yet it was easy to work, give him a living; and the thing he really liked was the location.

It overlooked a snug cove in the hills, with lush grass and a creek running through. Cottonwoods and willows grew along the water, cedars and pines on the ridges. Tom had lived here for nearly two years, bothering nobody and with nobody to bother him.

He had only one worry. He'd never enjoyed such peace and quiet before. Maybe it was too good to last.

The bad luck started on this June morning, when he was cooking breakfast at the fireplace outside his log shack. He heard the click of hoofs on rock and looked up to see a stranger coming along the bench on a gaunted sorrel. The first visitor he'd ever had.

He uncoiled his length and stood waiting. His clothes were pretty rough, he knew, and he hadn't trimmed his long mustache or thick hair lately. No wonder the stranger eyed him sidewise.

Tom didn't like his looks, either—nor his low-slung guns—but he had to be polite. "Howdy!" he said with a nod of greeting. "Light down and have some coffee."

The man swung down and took the tin cup Tom held out. He was limber and tough, bow-legged from the saddle. His eyes were black beads on each side of a crooked nose. His face was brown leather, with a bitter mouth showing through a wiry beard.

He jerked a thumb downward, toward the cove. "Good grass there," he said, "a-wasted on damn jackasses."

Tom Kehoe didn't have a horse. When he needed supplies, he loaded a couple of ore sacks on his burros and tramped the twenty miles to Medicine Drum. There he sold his rich ore to the stamp mill and bought his stuff at the company store.

Now he looked down at the two little mouse-gray animals, standing happily belly-deep in grass. "They ain't wasting it," he answered. "They're eating it."

The stranger gulped the coffee and dropped the cup. Didn't hand it back, just let it fall. "Good place to fatten a bunch of steers." He turned his beady eyes on Tom. "Don't claim it, do you? You're no nester."

Tom nodded backward. The mouth of his tunnel was in plain sight, with the pile of broken rock around it. "Quartz claim," he said. Of course, he didn't own the cove and had no right to it, except that he had found it first and loved it.

The man dug up a plug of tobacco. Didn't offer it to Tom, just bit and shoved it back in his pocket. "Well," he chewed out the words, "my name is Cray—Cash Cray—and I've took up Burton's little layout, over south. It'd gone to pieces since the old feller died, not a cow on it. I've brung up some Texas longhorns. Aim to sell beef to the big mine at Medicine Drum."

Tom kept calm, though he felt temper boiling up inside. It wasn't only that the cattle would graze his cove bare, chivvy his burros. Longhorns were dangerous for a man afoot. He'd be dispossessed; unable to bathe in the creek, or fetch water without running for it.

"Looky here, Cray," he protested, "I've always used this grass. There's plenty on the Burton range along the west fork."

Cray spat into the fire. "Not as good as this. The hell with you and your jacks!" He stepped into the saddle and rode away.

Tom looked after him. "I've had it smooth," he murmured, "for nigh two years. Here's the trouble, sure as shooting!"

He was right. From then on, it was one thing after another.

That afternoon was hot and still, with thunderclouds building up in the north. Tom could feel the storm coming. His skin prickled, and he sweated, even in the cool of his tunnel.

He was pawing over a pile of ore at the tunnel mouth, sorting out the high-grade stuff. It was pretty, he thought; bits of white rock all spangled with bright yellow. He whistled a tune, squatting on his heels, and reached for the gaudiest chunk of all.

Most rattlers are fair enough to give you warning, but this fellow was different! He was bothered by the weather, likely, something electric in the air. He'd had too much heat outside and had crawled behind the ore pile.

There was a dry whir, quick and close. Before Tom could leap aside, the rattler had struck across the rock heap, and Tom had two little bluish holes in his left forearm.

He smashed the four-footer with a chunk of ore, then did what he could. He crisscrossed the bite with his knife and sucked the wound. Luckily it was where he could reach it. He spat out mouthful after mouthful of blood, till no more would come. Then he tied his bandanna above the elbow, knotting it with his teeth and right hand.

Feeling sick and dizzy already, he went back to his cabin. He got out the bottle of whiskey he'd been saving for the Fourth of July, sat on his bunk and began to drink.

A long swallow. Wait a while and take another. Wait again and drink again.

Below the knotted handkerchief, his arm was swelling and turning a queer color. It was hurting, too. His fingers were numb, but an ache was creeping up that arm past the bandage to his shoulder.

The liquor took hold, but in a bad way. It gave Tom the horrors. He shivered, even while burning up, and his head swam. The cabin was growing dark. Was it the storm or was his sight failing? Somehow he didn't like the idea of dying in the dark.

He lurched up, fumbled for the sulphur matches, and managed to light his hanging lantern.

Back on the bunk, he took another long drink and dropped the empty bottle. He knew he was lying flat, yet he seemed to be whirling over and over in black emptiness, while a fireball—the lantern—made bright circles far away.

The fireball vanished, and he fell straight down. .

Tom didn't know when he waked or why the whiskey hadn't lasted better. He was aching all over, except his left arm. He couldn't feel that at all. His head was full of crazy notions. A fireball had bitten him, and a rattlesnake named Cray had threatened to drive a herd of bullsnakes over him.

It was night. The lantern was burning steadily, behaving itself at last. But outside lightning was flashing, thunder was booming, rain and wind were roaring.

For a while Tom listened to the storm. Faces kept leering at him from the shadows, crooked-nosed faces with snake eyes. Of course, that was foolishness. He blinked and shook his throbbing head.

He seemed to hear a sound that was different from the storm noises. Yes, it was a knocking at the door. Suddenly the door flew open and crashed against the wall. Then he saw the worst foolishness of all!

It seemed to be a woman—a girl—dripping wet and with her clothes clinging to her. A blanket covered her head, fair hair was plastered over a white face. Tom groaned and shut his eyes.

Then he opened them. The vision was speaking, so he had to believe it was real, after all!

"We saw your light. Can you help? My mother is sick. One of our horses is down —I think his leg is broken—and the top blew off our wagon!"

Tom rolled off the bunk and stood swaying. The girl's eyes grew round and her mouth opened as she smelled the whiskey and saw the wild, drunken look and the empty bottle on the floor. She backed away.

He couldn't talk very well. "Sorta—sorta busted up myself," he stammered. "Feller named Cray bit me." He waved his good hand. "But come on in! Everybody come in outa the weather."

The girl was gone as suddenly as she had appeared. Only the open door, letting in wind and rain, showed that she had been there at all. Tom didn't bother to shut it. A sick mother, he thought hazily. A sick mother would need his bunk.

He reeled over to the corner beside his

rusty stove and sat down with his back against the wall.

The next thing he knew, the small room was full of people. There were voices, feet treading the slab floor, the slam of the door. He lifted his heavy head, dropped it again.

Only three. The wet girl and a wet man were helping a wet woman between them. They were shaking out his blankets, putting her to bed.

The man had a hearty voice. "You'll be all right, old gal," he said. "We'll get fixed up, come morning. Don't worry!" Once he came and looked at Tom. "Much obliged, friend! Just rest easy there. Sleep it off!"

Tom slid down the wall and lay behind the stove.

It was broad daylight when he sat up, sick and sore. His mind was all mixed up, but he remembered people in the cabin, a storm raging, and that he had been dying.

The people were gone. The storm was over. He was still alive. Tom looked at his dangling left arm and breathed what was really a thankful prayer.

"By God, I've beaten the poison!"

The swelling had gone down. The arm was dead, but only because it needed blood. He worked the bandage loose. Then for the next half hour he sat there, gritting teeth while life slowly came back into it. At last he could move it, could even wiggle the fingers.

"I'll get grub inside me," he sighed, "and damn strong coffee."

But when he stumbled out to the place where he cooked, he stood transfixed, staring down into the cove. A tent had been set up near the cottonwoods. A rope had been strung between trees, and blankets and clothing flapped in the breeze. A bare-hooped emigrant wagon stood at one side. A clumsy work horse and a cow were grazing near it.

"Nesters!" he groaned. "It only needed that. I might have knowed. They'll cut the timber, build a shanty. They'll plow up the ground."

Suddenly a thought struck him. "Sho, all the bad luck ain't mine. Them folks have had it, too. I ought to wish 'em luck."

After bacon, beans, and a potful of black coffee, Tom felt better. Better still after a good wash from his water bucket. Then he went indoors and saw the blankets neatly folded on his bunk.

He spread them and lay down. He'd rest a while. . . .

Later on he was roused by a halloo from outside. "Hey, neighbor! How's your head today?"

Rolling out, he went to the door. He saw a broad-shouldered, whiskered man, a farmerish sort.

The nester held out a big hand. "I'm Amos Garrod. My wife is Hannah, and my daughter is Suzy. 'Twas mighty good to have a roof over us last night, though I'm sorry we busted into your little spree."

Grinning wryly, Tom shook hands. "I'd been snake-bit and was taking the liquor cure." He showed the scabbed wound on his arm.

"There, now!" Garrod swore contritely. "We done you wrong, mister. Thought ye was simply having a high old time. All right, be you?"

"Reckon so," Tom guessed. "How's the sick lady?"

"Doing fine. 'Twas a stomach misery. Bad water, I s'pose. Say, neighbor, I'm glad you're no whiskey-soaking rough. Because I'll be riding to town directly. Had to shoot one of my team, so I gotta buy another horse. Gotta fix up my land papers, too. May be gone a couple days, and the women folks'll be alone."

"I'll keep an eye on 'em," Tom promised.

"Oh, they're handy. Most likely they'll manage. Well, so long! Come visit when ye feel spry enough." The nester shook hands again and strode away down through the hillside cedars.

Through the rest of that day Tom kept thinking of the two women, especially the younger one. He wondered how she'd look when she wasn't all draggled and soaked and had wet hair falling around a scared face. She had taken him for a whiskey-soak, of course.

Next day he felt fit enough to work. But first he shaved the stubble from his cheeks and chin and trimmed his mustache with his knife. Couldn't do much with his brown, shoulder-length hair but comb it down smooth.

The horse was gone from the nesters' camp, so he knew that Garrod had left for town. He saw the girl stirring around down there, a nimble little figure in a blue dress. She milked the cow and took dried clothes off the line. Her bare head caught the sunlight, shone yellow.

"Like the gold in my ore!" Tom marveled. He'd have to fetch water pretty

soon, he told himself. Might as well have a word with her. Offer to lend a hand, show her he was no rough.

When he went, though, he was too shy to meet the women. He filled his bucket farther up the creek and found that the burrows had wandered there, too.

Back at his cabin, he continued to think of the nesters. The cove was a sweet place for a farm. He was bound to lose it, between that Clay hombre and the new folks, and it would be better to have a nice family there than a bunch of longhorns.

Thinking of Cash Cray made him think of something else. "I better go snake hunting! Where there's one rattler, you gen'rally find another, 'cause they come in pairs."

He got out his old hogleg, a Navy Colt, and poked around the rock piles. He didn't find the rattler's mate, so at last he stuck the gun in his belt. He'd finish sorting the ore and sack it.

But Tom didn't begin work. Instead he stood with an ore sack in one hand, staring down the ridge. He had glimpsed something —somebody moving up through the creekside cottonwoods. Was Garrod back already?

No, there were three—Cash Cray and two riders, making straight for the nester camp.

He saw them reach the tent, Cray ahead of the others. Saw Cray swing down and talk to the yellow-haired girl, gesturing and pointing. Her mother came from the tent and joined the confabulation.

Tom knew what that confabbing meant. It meant trouble. His hand dropped to his pistol. He was pretty good with it but not good enough for three gun-fighting cowmen. He'd go down there, anyway.

Right then the second rattlesnake buzzed, almost at his feet!

Tom didn't jump away or pull his gun. In a flash he knew what he was going to do. He flung the ore sack down, the snake struck at it, and for a moment, its fangs were caught in the tough fabric. In that moment Tom pounced. He clutched the thing close behind its ugly head. Harmlessly it rattled and writhed and coiled around his arm.

It was smaller than the other, a three-footer. He started down the hill, holding it behind him and well away from his body. Half throttled, the snake stopped rattling.

They were too busy to see Tom coming. The women were trying to talk, Cray was bawling them down. The two riders still sat their saddles, watching and grinning. One was lanky, and had a brick-red face. The other was squatty and blue-joweled. Both had artillery.

Tom stepped up. "You're off your range, Cray," he said flatly.

Everybody turned to him, surprised. The girl didn't recognize him at first, sane and sober. Suzy—that was her name. She had gold-brown eyes, he noticed. Her hair was all crinkly now and fine as silk, with a shining curl in front of each little ear. But she was pale again with fright.

Her mother was pale, too—maybe from the sickness. She was a thin woman with gray hair in a tight knot. Her face now was puckered with worry.

Cray spoke up. "This is my range. Or by hell, it's gonna be!"

"Guess it's Garrod's land," Tom said. "He'll have it fixed up by now, with Uncle Sam to back him up."

The cowman swore again. "'Taint yours, anyway, you damned rock buster! Go back to your badger hole or ye'll get hurt!"

"Easy, longhorn!" Tom shook his head. "Shouldn't bullyrag lone women. That ain't polite. Why don't ye wait and talk to their man?"

"Hell with waiting!" Cray was working himself into a fury, his mouth twisting in an ugly snarl. "I'm telling 'em to grab their trash and move outa here, *muy pronto*! I tell you the same! Say, what ye hiding there—a weapon?" His hand flashed to a gun.

"Yup!" Tom jumped forward, bringing his right arm from behind him. The rattlesnake stared Cray in the face, not six inches from his crooked nose!

Cash Cray went back one stiff step. Tom followed, pushing the snake closer. It wriggled and thrashed, whirred its warning. Its hideous little eyes, wide-open jaws, deadly fangs, and lancing tongue seemed to paralyze Cray, turn his skin to chalk and his blood to water. He stood stock-still.

One of the cowboys yelled, "Hey, boss! Shall I cut him down?"

"D'ye want this in your snoot?" Tom growled. "Tell your warriors to turn and ride. Far and fast!"

"Do what he says!" Cray squalled. "Get

out quick! The feller's loco! He'll kill me!"

They spun their ponies and dug in the spurs. In a second they were off in a flurry of hoofbeats. They didn't stop.

"Now, then!" Tom ordered. "Reach up!"

Stiffly Cray raised both hands. Tom jerked Cray's guns from their holsters and tossed them aside. Then he stepped back and threw the snake. It struck ground twenty feet away. It writhed into a coil, and he pulled his own iron and blew its head off.

"The same to you, hombre," he said, "if you come around any more. Now haul onto your nag and skedaddle!"

Slowly and weakly, like an old man, Cash Cray climbed into his saddle. He swayed and clutched the horn, as the horse broke into a lope.

After he had gone, the three stood for a while in solemn silence. Tom looked into Suzy's gold-brown eyes and couldn't look away.

"I'd better wash my hands," he murmured, not knowing what else to say.

Suzy shivered. "You were holding that awful thing!" she breathed. "After being bitten by one, too!" Suddenly her cheeks flooded with color. "Dad told me. You were sick that night, when I thought—"

Tom chuckled. "I was drunk, all right. But I had a reason."

"It's a wonder you got over it!"

"Oh, I know rattlers," he said easily. "I've handled 'em before. Getting bit was an accident."

Mrs Garrod sat on a fallen cottonwood and fanned herself with her apron. "You certainly handled that cowman! I know his breed, drat him! Thinks he owns the earth, wherever grass grows. Oh dear! He'll be back. My man will have to fight him."

"I'll fight him, too," Tom comforted, "if he shows up again." He picked up the two revolvers. "You know how to use these?"

"You hold 'em way out, shut your eyes and pull the jigger."

"I know," Suzy smiled. "Dad showed me!"

Tom handed her a gun. "Use it if needful. Keep your eyes open and be careful. I'll be watching up yonder. If you need help, shoot in the air."

He lingered for a minute of two, unwilling to go. Couldn't think of anything else to do or say. So he headed back for his cabin, gathering up the dead snake on

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the way. He'd keep its rattle, along with the other. They were supposed to bring luck, and he sure needed a change for the better.

They hadn't seen the last of Cray, he guessed. No knowing how far the ugly cuss would go, but he was mighty mad.

Well, Tom had two guns now. Pretty soon Garrod would be back with his gun. Then there'd be four, with two good men behind them. Enough to slow up three hard-case cowpokes, anyway.

That night the coyotes made an unearthly racket down the valley. They had found the dead horse, Tom knew, the one Garrod had lost. He lay in his bunk, listening, wondering if the snarling, yelping and howling would make the women uneasy.

Amos Garrod hadn't come home yet.

The nester didn't come next morning, either. Tom saw the two women moving around camp. First, cooking breakfast, with the smoke of their fire going straight up. Then washing something in a wooden tub. Mrs. Garrod seemed to be well enough now.

He'd go down there pretty soon, he decided. Didn't want to shove in where he wasn't wanted; but he might chop wood or tote water.

He couldn't settle down to work but kept looking off southward, hoping to see Garrod ride up the valley with his new horse, half expecting to see Cash Cray coming with new guns. There'd be more trouble with that hombre. Tom was willing to bet.

Sure enough, Cray came, though not to fight with guns.

It was along toward noon when Tom sighted movement far down where the valley ridges pinched together. Horses and riders? . . . No, a bunch of cattle.

They poured through the gap, crowding each other, tossing long horns. The leaders spread out to graze, trotted into the cottonwoods, splashed into the creek. Those behind them pushed harder and harder, faster and faster. They were being hazed in!

Five hundred? A thousand? Enough to fill the cove!

Tom heard them bawling as they squeezed and prodded each other. He looked down on bony, roach-haired backs, brown backs, red backs, backs spotted with white. He saw heaving heads, wide horns gleaming in the hot sunlight.

They meant murder, sheer murder! Nobody could face those wild Texas bulls on foot—and there wasn't a horse in the valley.

Tom ran down through the cedars, sliding and jumping. Once he fell and rolled to a jarring stop against a tree. No matter, the tumble had saved some time. He reached the camp, bruised and out of breath, but ahead of the steers.

Suzy and her mother were standing by the washtub, gazing to the south, shading their eyes with their hands.

"What's happening!" Mrs. Garrod asked.

"Don't wait a minute!" Tom yelled. "Snatch your cow! Yank her up to my place!"

"But—but—"

"Go on, scoot! Cray's pushing his steers in! They'll smash everything!"

"But all our things!"

"I'll save what I can here. Maybe I can turn 'em with my guns."

The women ran with flapping skirts, Suzy dragging the reluctant cow, her mother slapping its rump. Tom dove into the tent. Working like fury, he hauled out everything he could lay hands on—bedding, boxes and bundles, a chest of drawers—and threw it on the wagon. That was sturdy; it might stand up.

Then he made his own race to safety—almost too late. Rumbling hoofs were right at his heels, he thought, hot breath on his neck, when he whirled and fired both guns.

Four wild-eyes steers swerved away, snorting. Tom turned and raced on. He reached the last steep slope in time to help with the cow.

There he stood with Suzy and her mother, watching the havoc below. The camp was overrun by the big, lean evil-tempered animals. The fire was trampled out, the washtub upset and splintered. The tent went down. The clothesline went, too, and one steer rampaged away with a white garment trailing from the horns.

"My best dress!" Suzy wailed. "I'd just washed it!"

"Holy hell!" Tom swore, horrified. "I plumb forgot them clothes!"

Suzy tried to smile. "Never mind. I wasn't inside it."

Mrs Garrod gasped and panted, hands clasped over her thin breast. "Everything gone to flinders! What will Amos say?"

"Not everything," Tom soothed. The wagon was pitching like a ship at sea as

the brutes surged around and blundered against it, but it didn't upset.

"What can we do?" Mrs. Garrod moaned.

Not much, Tom thought glumly. Cray and his cow-hands were in sight now, down the valley. They were whooping, waving blankets, shooting in the air, keeping the steers on the move.

"Our guns wouldn't do no good," he scowled. "Only stir the critters up more, start 'em milling. It would take something bigger to really turn 'em."

Suddenly an idea flashed into his mind, and he smashed one fist into the other and yelled.

"By glory, that's just what I've got! Blasting powder!"

He ran to his tunnel. In a minute he was out again, a keg on his shoulder, a coil of fuse on his arm, a shovel in one hand. Sweating from his exertions, he trotted northward along the bench until the ledge vanished in a rocky slide. Here the cove ended, and the creek gurgled out under the jumble of rocks below.

The burros hee-hawed and came scampering up to him. "Look out, little jacks!" he called. "This is business!"

They knew about powder and shied off to a safe distance.

Tom kicked in the head of his keg. He dug a hole and poured in a whacking charge, cut fuse and stamped it down with rocks and earth. He ran on farther along the slide and did the same thing, did it again and again until the keg was empty. Then he got out his sputtering sulphur matches and ran back along the line, lighting each fuse as he went.

He was back on the bench when the first blast went off with a fine flash and roar, belching smoke and stones. Others followed in quick succession. *Wham! Wham! Wham!*

The result was wonderful! When he looked down into the cove, he saw that every steer was on the dead run, head down, tail up, as they stampeded away from the blasts and toward the gap.

He almost felt sorry for the three cowmen. They were lashing their ponies and riding for dear life, the herd almost on top of them. Maybe they'd get clear—and maybe they wouldn't!

Amos Garrod came home that afternoon, leading his new horse. He rode up the trampled valley at a lumbering gallop and stared at the wreck of his camp as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

At Tom's hail, he left the horses and stumped up the ridge, his bewilderment turning to relief when he saw that his wife and daughter were safe.

"Took me longer'n I thought," he puffed, "to find a plow hoss. Had to wait till another pilgrim came through with a spare critter. By Godfrey, it looks like all hell had busted loose here!"

"It did," Tom said and told the story, helped out considerably by the women. "I don't much care," he ended it, "if Cash Cray got stomped to death. If he managed to slide out, I don't know what else he'll do."

Garrod grinned through his whiskers. "I know! Because some salty-looking fellers rode into Medicine Drum while I was there. They was a posse from somewheres south after a galoot named Cray and a bunch of cattle."

"Well, tan my britches!" Tom exploded. "Ye mean he'd rustled 'em?"

"Same thing, the way I heard it. The herd belonged to him, all right, but was mortgaged to some cow-town bank and they was going to foreclose. Cray simply lit out with the lot. So now he'll be caught, or he'll high-tail it. Anyway, the steers will be driven back south."

Tom drew a long breath. "Just goes to show," he said, "how queer luck is. It hit us some hard wallops, both you and me. But it hit him a heap worse."

Garrod guffawed. "You did, ye mean!"

" 'Twas luck," Tom insisted.

He turned to Suzy and couldn't shift his glance. The girl gave him a smile, then her eyelids fluttered down. She was right pretty, he thought, with a nice pink color. Not white and scared any more.

"And it shows, too," he ruminated, "how wrong a feller can be. When you folks moved into the cove, I reckoned it was bad luck for me. But now we've got acquainted, I reckon it was the best—the very best!"

"Maybe for all of us," Suzy whispered softly.

THE END

White Queen CALLING

By ADAM REBEL

In a dark cavern, the mare had just dropped a foal—
and now a pack of forty wolves moved in for the kill!

THE lop-eared one wheeled a few yards to the old white mare's right, the thin snow a swirl around her as she made ready for her eighth attack, the sixth and seventh having brought blood. Hot breath puffing little clouds in the intense cold, she set herself, eyes gleaming, lips lifting in a snarl at the rest of the pack for the stupidity it seemed every wolf was showing. Muzzle white with age, her battle-scarred gray head wise to all the tricks of getting a victim off its feet and down for the kill, the old wolf saw no need for more than forty hungry fighters taking this long about it.

And yet the ageing mare of the wild horse herd was still standing, showing her teeth and stamping her forefeet. Her rump was jammed into the narrow mouth of an opening in the foot of the cliffs, her forelock angrily swinging, the light of the lowering moon across the sear of many-colored cliffs and weird hills making her eyes two shining pools.

It was gang war on the lone defender of the hoe. Since just after midnight outbursts of sharp cries had filled the air, coming from the lean horde facing the mare. Drooling saliva, they tramped the last of the early spring snow in a wide half circle, and their coppery eyes burned. Dawn was not far away, but the mere coming of light would do little toward stopping the battle far back here in the untraveled wilderness of the lone and impossible Bad Lands. Usually the wolves were night hunters, but famine was riding the land, making them seek a kill when and where they could find it. Starvation knows no difference between darkness and light.

The mare was bleeding. Red dripped from her smooth black nose and from a cut on her white chest and streaked her forelegs. But the cold air was slowing the blood, and her swift wounds had dampened none of her fighting spirit.

There was a double reason for the mare to hold her ground and keep on her feet, slashing fore-hoofs and nipping teeth her only weapons to keep the pack from closing in. Life was good even to a wild mare. In this frightfully one-sided fight, there was a second reason, never to be forgotten, and far more important to the mare than her own life.

Behind her two big, wondering dark-brown eyes were watching, their owner unable to understand it. A black and white-spotted colt, he was half-warm in the dark hole three yards behind the furiously swishing and slapping tail on the mare's white rump. At times the noise made him tremble from his cocked ears to his small ebony-like hoofs.

The colt, less than a week old, had been fathered by Old Lightning, the proud and shining black king-stud of the herd. Feeling the pangs of coming motherhood, the mare had slipped away from the herd, as a wild thing would. Always the secretive one, even in times like this, she had found this seemingly safe spot in which to bring the colt into the world and keep close watch over him until his long thin legs would be strong enough to run at her side. Not until the wolves tore her down, not until they had ripped the last breath from her and tore her to bits would she cease to fight for him.

With head low and fangs bared, the wise old she-wolf started her charge. No born killer in any sense, ready most times to turn her heels to danger and run for it, the mare was not half so smart as a wolf, especially this lean old wench. She saw the attack coming, stamped her hoofs, whipped that long forelock, and thrust her muzzle forward to meet the charge with bared teeth.

Coming in with a rush, the timber wolf sheered to one side just in time to keep from being caught. A younger male was

not so smart, having yet to develop the knack of turning from quick danger in midair. Seeing the long smooth neck bared to him, he swept in for his attack, but he had delayed an instant too long.

A backlash of the mare's wildly swinging head struck him as he left the ground. Long teeth, grown for the gentler work of cutting tender vegetation, caught him on the side of the head. With a ripping bite and a furious sling the old mare sent the brute spinning to her left, an ear and a cheek torn half off him, his blood spilling in the moonlight.

It was as good as life itself thrown their way for the rest of the half-starved pack. Blood was blood, meat was meat to a hungry wolf. A lean old one-eye took instant advantage of this unexpected situation. The young brute landed in front of her on his back, with his feet in the air. Maddened by the sight and smell of the blood, the she-wench rammed her muzzle forward. Before he could have known what was happening she had cut his throat from ear to ear and torn the gullet out of him.

For the moment the mare was forgotten. Here was blood and hot meat and forty devils mad for it. It was wolf eat wolf. The pack snarled and snapped, fell over each other, each plunging gray shape bent on getting a chunk, lick or smell of the fallen brother. Before it was done two others had been ripped, their blood flying. Like the first, the second two were down, gutted, ripped to bits, some of the pack running away with dripping bones.

Such things were not for a mare, wild or otherwise, that was strictly a high-born lady when she was left alone. There were killings in a wild herd. Sometimes a stallion fought a stallion; sometimes the entire herd swung into action against common enemies and battled grizzlies that were trying to run down a colt or filly or a mountain lion that suddenly fell from a ledge and attacked one of the band.

When horses were forced to kill, terror filled the herd, but no horse devoured his victim. When one was hurt, the others stormed up and around the unfortunate animal in a shielding ring, ready to fight for him or her.

The cannibalism of the timber wolves maddened the mare. Without the colt behind her in the darkness, it could have meant the end of her. Without him to stand and fight for, she might suddenly have bolted and made a terrorized run for it.

The gray devils would have been at her heels, and some of them would have been fast enough to get ahead and force her to a stop on better fighting ground. Then, able to come at her from all sides, the wise ones would have started hamstringing her from behind, getting her down on her rump. With all of them on her in a snapping and snarling cloud, it would have taken little time to cut her throat, and the crazed brutes would be devouring her even as she was falling over to die.

But the big-eyed colt, all-important to her, held her to the spot; and there she stood, slinging her head, stamping, snorting, sometimes whinnying her own far-quivering cries that were—probably without her knowing it—frantic calls for help from any direction or in any form it might come.

She was still there when the first gray light of dawn tinged the rims and crags of the fantastic oceans of hills and the purple shadows began to fade and die from the draws and coulees. Daybreak was finally on its way to this far-flung eerie sea of wastelands, now one of the last of the wild horse hideaways.

She was still holding her ground, perhaps a little wiser in this deadly and bloody business. The wolves had become wary, even the old lop-eared one not so sure of herself. Having caught the knack of it, the mare had sent two more brazen killers to their doom, peeling a foot-long strip of shaggy back from one fool, tearing the end of the snarling and snapping muzzle off another. The second had escaped, run-

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ning like a flying, bouncing tumbleweed before a terrific wind, a dozen of his fellows after him.

In any other place the coming light might have made the pack start a sneaking fade-away, but in the Bad Lands there was little to fear. Man, the one thing dreaded by all wild creatures, did not come too often. In fact, he never came to some vast sections of this hopelessly broken and wind-eroded country, waterless and barren. For miles on end the dust of the ages on the faces of the dead and dry cliffs never echoed any voice save that of the whistling winter gales, the occasional battle cries of fighting animals, or the thundering drum of the wild herd led by the mighty Old Lightning in his shining coat.

Starving wolves with an intended victim like this mare at bay might have stayed with her all through the day and the night, too, nagging, sawing in and out, gluttons feasting on their own wounded now and then while waiting for the big kill. Sounds in the distance changed their minds just as the rising sun was flinging fiery reins along the rims.

It was a sound of hoofs coming from northward, a clicking, clacking and ringing that was like bells on layers of shale underfoot. At once consternation struck the wolf pack. They leaped, snarled, surged back. Suddenly they were in mass flight, every wolf for himself, and let the devil take the rest.

Another sound came now, keen and far-reporting from wall to wall in the limitless cliffs and ledges. Following it came a second, a third, a fourth. Two running wolves suddenly turned, somersaulted, their last savage growls coming from them as they hit the ground and rolled over and over.

Panic gripped the mare. Snorting furiously, her head stretched up, a new terror filled her eyes. Those sounds marked another danger, more appalling, more crushing, than the gray timber devils that had menaced her a few moments before. In a fashion she had become used to trying to deal with them. These new sounds, the faster pounding of hoofs, meant the coming of man, the most dreaded and deadly creature on earth as far as the wild things were concerned.

She whimpered, a strange, frightening sound. The spotted colt came forward, crowding against her rear. Suddenly the mare bolted from the hole and turning immediately to her left, hugged close to the cliffs.

The startled colt swung in beside her on his long legs. His head was up, black tail high, black mane beginning to roll. One did not have to be old and wise to know when it was time to brave the dangers of the outer world and run for it beside his mother.

Four horsemen were popping into view back there, their rifle barrels glistening, excited voices rising. Again the guns crashed, and the Bad Lands doubled, tripled, the echo and re-echo of the sounds. Running, looking back over her shoulder with walling eyes, the mare saw them and swung right and left like a ring fighter trying to bore through the toughest of the rounds.

They rounded a bend, the colt running as if he had always been there at her side —seed of Old Lightning and the white queen of the herd. With a loud cry the men back there seemed to fall out of sight, the walls, the now ringing cliffs swallowing them. The old mare pounded on, the glory of motherhood at her shoulder, proud little monarch himself and—if they lived this through—one day a king stud of the wild herd in his own right.

It was a getaway now. Old to all the tricks that men so often tried to outsmart the wild herd, the mare kept going, winding and twisting through what seemed impossible bends. Here and there she slowed the pace, the colt always in mind. He was doing well enough for himself, however, showing amazing strength and, already, the long, sleek running stride of the black stud who had fathered him.

Anything that had a chance to drop out of sight back here was immediately lost. In the past, little groups of Sioux Indians had made fools of scores of cavalrymen, attacking, vanishing, throwing them into hopeless confusion and wild retreat. Outlaws sometimes came, dropping from sight with swarms of possemen on their heels.

The mare never glimpsed the men again. They never had a chance to glimpse her a second time. Winding and twisting, pace slowed to a walk, she kept on until the sun was high in the sky. Through a last break in a wall of cliffs that seemed layer on layer of every known color, shade, and hue, she turned down a narrow trail made by many hoofs long before.

Now one of the hidden wild horse basins was at hand, a water hole surrounded by brush and sparkling deep down on a grassy floor. She headed straight for the water. At the rim of the pool she lowered her head to drink. The colt nudged up, his nose going under her flank and back to the right place, tail switching and his small hoofs dancing with the delight of the warm, rich milk.

She might have remained forever, just herself and the colt, on a slight rise under the leafless branches of a tree where she stood and dozed. An hour passed before a noise from the colt roused her with a startled snort, and her head swung up.

Some of the wolves had found her, more than twenty of the saggy devils having picked up her trail. In a circle, they were advancing, heads down, tails between their legs, the same old murderous glint in their hungry eyes. Old lop-ear was there, grinning at her, fangs bared, mouth drooling.

The mare nickered. There was no telling why. Ringed by the devils, no shelter here, it was the same old frantic call, a far-quivering going out and up to beat against the sounding board of the distant walls.

The wolves were taking their time; they were going to be sure of it. The lop-eared one was setting herself. Actually she was only making a play for attention, holding the mare's eyes on her while another lean old wench and a big male started to sneak in from behind, the quick job of hamstringing on their minds.

And then an answering cry came floating, falling, rising and falling down the basin. It was not a mere mare's nickering but a far-reaching whistling, a stallion's challenging call to battle. Behind that noise lifted another, a rolling, tapping, low-thundering as if something furiously drumming the earth.

The wolves saw it coming. They fell back, snarling, and began to run. The greatest pack that ever prowled the far places was never large enough and brave enough to face this.

Out of a pass to westward stormed the horse herd, Old Lightning leading as always. In the past this same waiting white mare had proudly run just behind his shoulder, mane and tail flying banners in the wind. More than a hundred strong they were—many mares with colts and fillies racing beside them—the wild herd charging in all its fury at the call of the queen.

VIGILANTE VALLEY

(*Continued from page* 50)

It was that way with Dave Mathers when strength had flowed back into him. Bonnie was there beside his bed, and the things she told him were the things he wanted to hear. No more Starlighters; no more Vigilantes. Old Jasper Hallet had stopped the fight when he heard Bonnie tell Pete Burke that she was never going back to the Bar B.

"I should have felt sorry for Grandad," she said. "He looked awfully old and sick and kind of helpless, as if the world had just caved in on top of him."

"Did he make a deal with Jasper?"

She nodded. "The stolen cattle have been brought back and Granddad is going to let the matter drop. He's promised to trade winter grass for summer range. Dave, I think that what hurt him most was that with Deems and Kyner gone, his men and neighbors wouldn't fight. Jasper Hallet had the loyalty of every man who was with him, but Grandad didn't have anybody."

He reached out and took her hands. "I don't have anything to offer you except a little old ranch that needs capital to make it pay, but I love you. Maybe we could get along if you—"

"Dave, Dave!" she said in a soft voice. "You have everything to offer. Everything."

HORSESHOES AREN'T ALWAYS LUCKY

By SAM BRANT

Four grim bandits try a bold robbery in Wagonville!

TROUBLE with Buck Dailey was he just didn't seem to know his own strength. You take a man who is six feet four inches tall and weighs around two hundred and sixty pounds and you've sure got a big hunk of hombre. Which same was Buck Dailey. Due to his having been a blacksmith for so many years, most of all that weight was muscle.

"Every time I see Buck, he reminds me of a mountain looking for some place to settle down," old Jeff Lester was right fond of saying. "It's no wonder he don't ever tote a gun. All he needs to do is just fall on a badman and crush him to death."

Lester owned the general store in the throving little cowtown called Wagonville —population thirty-two humans, forty horses, seven dogs and two cats. The town boasted of the general store, a saloon, the blacksmith shop, a feed and grain store, and a bank.

Of course there weren't enough people in town to keep the bank going, but since it was the only place where all of the ranchers within a hundred miles or so around could deposit their money, cash checks or get loans, the Wagonville Bank was doing all right.

Will Johnson, president and owner of the bank, claimed that having the blacksmith shop next building to his place of business sometimes was almost more than he could stand. A blacksmith shop going full blast is not what could rightly be called a place of peace and quiet.

"Buck Dailey makes so much noise that I can't hardly sleep days," Johnson told the patrons of the Glad Hand Saloon, one evening, and then waited for the other men at the bar to laugh. The banker loved a joke—if he told it.

The bartender and a couple of small ranchers laughed like it was the funniest thing they had ever heard, but some of the other men didn't even smile. In their estimation Johnson was fat and lazy and they thought his two tellers were the ones who did all the work around the bank. It was their idea the naps he took during the day probably were disturbed by the noise coming from the blacksmith shop.

Buck Dailey, the blacksmith, was standing down at the far end of the bar, with his back to the group around the banker, and he hadn't heard what Johnson said. He wouldn't have minded, if he had heard it. He owned the smithy—building and all —so the bank couldn't force him to move.

Besides the blacksmith had something else on his mind. There were a couple of strangers standing near him at the bar and he didn't like their looks. They were both dressed in worn range clothes with their holsters tied down, and to him they appeared to be a pair of gunsharps who were just hankering for trouble.

"Big feller, ain't he," said the smaller of the two men, looking at Dailey. "I've seen a tub of lard that was big, too."

Scowling, the second man stared at the blacksmith.

"Yuh shouldn't say things like that, Frisco," he said. He was almost as tall as Dailey, but not as heavy. "It ain't nice to go around insultin' a tub of lard like that."

"Reckon you two gents must be strangers in town." Dailey finished off his drink and put down his glass, then stepped closer to the two men. "Such being the case permit me to welcome you to Wagonville. Buck Dailey is my name."

"I'm Bull Malton," said the tall man. "And this is Frisco Reed. When we need anybody to welcome us, we'll let you know."

"That's right," snarled Frisco Reed. "Besides, my paw told me never to talk to strangers—'specially when I don't like their faces."

Usually Dailey was a quiet man who tried to keep out of trouble but for some reason he could see these two strangers were deliberately trying to pick a fight with him. He didn't like Malton and Reed and he was getting mad.

It was "Bull" Malton who made a fatal mistake. He suddenly snarled and reached

for his gun as if Dailey had said something to him that called for shooting. "Frisco" Reed also lowered his hand toward his holster.

"You been askin' for it," Dailey said.

He reached out, caught both men by the necks and banged their heads together good and hard. Malton and Reed had drawn their guns, but Dailey shook the two men so hard that the weapons dropped from their grasp with loud thuds.

Holding them by the necks with either hand the blacksmith rushed the two men across the room toward the swinging doors of the saloon. He released Bull Malton first, at the same time giving him a kick that sent him hurtling through the doors. Frisco Reed followed.

Dailey dusted off his hands and turned back. The other men in the room were motionless, watching him in amazement. Will Johnson frowned.

"What's the idea, Buck?" demanded the banker. "Why did you throw those two men out? They didn't seem to be making any trouble."

"That's what you think, Johnson," said Dailey.

He didn't bother to explain. Most of the men in the barroom were his friends, and he was sure they believed he had done what he considered to be right. In his opinion Johnson always did have a way of sticking his nose into other people's business, and expressing his ideas on the subject before he knew what it was all about.

Dailey picked up the guns and handed them to the bartender. He was still angry, so he said the first thing that entered his head.

"If Mr. Johnson's friends come back," he told the bartender, "give them their guns. I'm going home to bed."

"My friends!" exclaimed Johnson excitedly. "What do you mean by that, Dailey? I never saw these men before in my life. The idea of accusing me of associating with a couple of owlhoot riders."

"You seemed right certain they weren't aimin' to make any trouble," said Dailey. "A little too shore of it, the way I figger."

He turned and stalked out of the saloon. He did not even hear what the banker shouted at him. He reached the street. There was no sign of Malton and Reed out there.

Dailey walked on along the plank sidewalk until he came to the blacksmith shop. He unlocked the front door and went in, locking the door behind him. He went through the shop and opened the door leading to his living quarters in the rear. Here he undressed and climbed into his bunk and slept peacefully until morning.

Early the next day Buck Dailey was busy at work in the shop. A waddy from the nearby Rocking A had brought in a horse that needed new shoes all around. If the two gunslingers were still around town, the blacksmith hadn't seen any sign of them.

"Reckon it will be a big day in town today," said the Flying A waddy. "It's the first of the month, so all the ranches will be payin' off the hands."

"So it is." Dailey glanced at a calendar on the wall. The first of July! Shucks, time shore does fly! Why, it seems like only yesterday when it was June."

The waddy laughed and then grew serious.

"Reckon there will be a lot of money drawn out of the bank today," he said. "What with the ranch owners all getting cash for the payrolls."

"Shore will." Dailey finished shoeing the horse. "There you are, Jim. All done."

Drawing out a handful of silver dollars, the waddy paid for the job and then mounted his horse and rode away. It was not eight o'clock yet and the bank didn't open until nine. Wagonville was quiet, for the men from the ranches had not as yet arrived in town.

Dailey went to the door of the blacksmith shop and stood there resting for a few minutes. He had to finish up some work he had been doing—making a new front axle for a ranch wagon—but there was no hurry about that.

Four riders appeared at the upper end of the street which was close to the bank and the blacksmith shop. Bandanna masks hid the lower part of their faces and the brims of their hats were pulled down so that their eyes were in shadow.

They rode swiftly to the front of the bank and here two of the masked men swung out of their saddles, handing their reins to the other two who remained on their horses.

At first sight of the four men Dailey had ducked back into the blacksmith shop where he could watch without being seen.

"Bank robbers!" he muttered. "And me with no gun. All the same I've got to find some way to stop them!"

Two of the masked men disappeared inside the bank. Hastily Dailey looked around the blacksmith shop, seeking some sort of weapon. He spied a small keg of nails and grabbed it up. He rushed to the door. One of the masked men holding the horses was sitting in the saddle with his back toward the blacksmith shop.

Dailey stepped out of the shop and tossed the keg of nails at the nearest bandit. The keg struck the man in the

back with such force that he was knocked out of the saddle. In falling, he dropped the reins of the horse he had been holding.

"Bank robbers!" shouted Dailey loudly. "Bank robbers!"

The second mounted masked man fired just as the blacksmith ducked back into the shop.

The bullet whistled by Buck Dailey's ear. He grabbed a handful of horseshoes and ran to the door. He flung one of the horseshoes. It struck the mounted bank robber squarely in the face just as he let fly a second shot at the blacksmith. The masked man's bullet went wild.

Dailey threw another shoe. The blacksmith was the champion horseshoe pitcher of the little town and his aim was true. The shoe hit the masked man on the head and knocked him unconscious. He fell forward over the neck of his horse.

Men appeared from buildings up and down the street with guns ready in their hands. They had heard Dailey's shout and the roar of the bandit's gun. The four horses of the bank robbers went tearing down the street—the unconscious man still in the saddle on the fourth horse.

The other two bandits dashed out of the bank, each with a sack filled with money in one hand and a Colt in the other. Dailey jumped back into the blacksmith shop as they saw him and raised their guns. Bullets broke the glass in one of the windows of the shop and thudded against the wooden sides of the building.

Across the street in front of the general store, old Jeff Lester raised the rifle he had picked up and fired. One of the masked men dropped with a bullet in his heart. The other went down, wounded in the leg as the store keeper triggered a second shot.

"Nice shootin', Jeff," yelled Dailey as he stepped out of the shop. "You got them both."

Men came running to the scene and the masks were removed from the faces of the bank robbers. The dead man was Bull Malton, and the man Lester had wounded in the leg was Frisco Reed.

"Thought so," said Dailey. "That's why they tried to pick a fight with me in the saloon last night." He moved toward the open front door of the bank. "Come on, let's see what happened in here."

He stepped into the bank with some of the other men following him. They found Will Johnson in his office. He was bound and gagged. Two of the men quickly released the bank president.

"Those robbers," exclaimed Johnson. "They got in here, tied me up and gagged me, and then robbed the vault."

"Shore," said Dailey, looking at the banker. "But you figgered they would get away with the cash. Reckon you must have been short of bank funds and had to do somethin' about it before the ranchers started drawing on their accounts as they always do on the first of the month."

"What are you talking about, Dailey?" snarled Johnson. "It sounds crazy to me."

"You must have made a deal with Malton and Reed and a couple of their outlaw pards to rob the bank," said Dailey. "My shop was too close and you were afraid I'd notice something suspicious, so those two had orders to pick a fight with me in the saloon and down me if they could."

"Might be a lot to that," said Jeff Lester, who was among those listening. "Those men didn't seem drunk, and yet I saw them go for their guns before yuh grabbed them last night, Buck."

"Right." Dailey nodded. "And Johnson acted like they were his friends first off. Then he denied it because he said he resented anybody thinking he would associate with a couple of owlhoots. I didn't know they were owlhoots until Johnson said so."

"We have been short of cash here in the bank," said one of the tellers, who had just arrived on the scene. "I noticed that. Furthermore Mr. Johnson had been doing a lot of gambling over in the railroad town lately."

"It's a lie," shouted Johnson. He glared at Frisco Reed who had been brought into the bank. "I had nothing to do with the robbers."

"Then how did Reed and Malton get into this bank?" demanded Dailey. "You were the only one here. The bank isn't supposed to open until nine, and yet they walked in at eight without breaking the door down."

"You might as well admit the whole thing, Johnson," said Frisco Reed. "With Bull dead and the other boys captured I shore ain't goin' to be blamed for this alone."

"And if you hadn't started tossing those horseshoes and stuff they might have got away with it, Buck," said Lester, looking at the blacksmith in admiration. "I saw yuh when yuh started that." He grinned sardonically at the banker. "Looks like horse shoes aren't lucky for yuh, Johnson."

THE END

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